

Georges Simenon

ESCAPE IN VAIN

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH
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THE LODGER

I

'FOR heaven's sake shut the window!' groaned Elie, pulling the blankets up to his chin. 'Have you gone quite crazy?'

'But there's such a fug in here.' Sylvie's form showed in white relief against the greyness of the window. 'You were sweating all last night, and the place smells like a sickroom.'

He snuffled, and let himself down lower into the bed, curling his lean limbs into a ball, while the girl stepped into the warm glow of the bathroom and turned on the taps. For some minutes the hiss of water made further talk out of the question. One eye emerging from the sheets, Elie contemplated now the window, now the bathroom. The light outside was cheerless, and the sight of the open window sent a shiver down his spine each time he looked towards it. That morning early risers must have been greeted by a snowstorm, but it was now eleven and no more flakes were falling from the fallow clouds hanging low above the housetops of Brussels. The street-lamps in the Avenue du Jardin Botanique had been left on, and shop-windows, too, were lighted up.

From where he lay Elie had a clear view over the black, gleaming Avenue, up and down which trams were gliding in slow, clanging files. And he could also see the Botanical Gardens, sheeted with snow, the pond frozen over but for a small black patch of open water in which three swans sat motionless.

'Aren't you getting up?'

'Can't you see I'm ill?'

They had stayed until three in the morning at the *Merryland* cabaret, though all the evening Elie had been blowing his nose till the tears streamed from his eyes, and imploring her to return to the hotel. It was a nasty cold, the sort that easily develops into bronchitis or the 'flu. He felt naked and defenceless in a hostile world, sweat oozing from every pore.

'Do please shut that window, Sylvie.'

After turning off the taps she walked across the room to the window. The bathroom mirror was coated with steam.

'I'll bet old Van der Boomp is sleeping late this morning. Isn't it funny he should be staying at the *Palace*, too, and in the next room to ours?'

But Elias Nagear — since coming to Belgium he had accepted, not without some secret pleasure, the abbreviation of his name to 'Elie' — wasn't in a mood to find anything 'funny', and he grunted surlily:

'Damn Van der Boomp! I'm certain it's on his account you kept me hanging about at that wretched bar till three in the morning.'

'Don't be so absurd!'

He knew better, but it wasn't worth arguing about. When, towards midnight, they had entered the *Merryland*, the room had been practically empty but for a few professional dancers glumly eyeing their empty glasses. Under these conditions even the band seemed reluctant to strike up, and Sylvie kept on yawning. But a change had come over the scene when in the small hours a fat Dutchman rolled in, escorted by two Belgians who were evidently introducing him to the night life of the capital. Everybody seemed to wake up, and one could have sworn the lights went brighter.

The Dutchman was obviously out to enjoy himself.

He had a hearty, boyish laugh. A quarter of an hour after his appearance, four girls were chattering at his table, champagne was flowing freely, the smoke of exotic cigarettes and Havana cigars mingling above their heads.

Standing beside Elie at the bar, Sylvie kept looking enviously at the group.

'If you're feeling rotten, go to bed. I'm staying here '

It wasn't jealousy, but he refused to budge – perhaps just to aggravate her.

'I suppose you're staying on account of Van der Boomp?' he suggested 'Van der Boomp' was the name Sylvie had invented for the portly Dutchman. It got on her nerves to see other girls swilling champagne while she was sipping a modest gin-fizz at the bar.

'I don't think much of his taste anyhow,' she whispered, after a long, appraising look at the four girls. Then, abruptly changing her mind, she added: 'All right. Let's go.'

When they were crossing the lobby of the *Palace Hotel* on their way to the lift they saw the swing-door open and Van der Boomp roll in. So the girls hadn't been able to hold him, after all! Sylvie thought better of him at once, and when, in the lift, he shot obviously admiring glances at her, her opinion of him rose still higher.

But she had had to spend the night with Nagear, who was now gazing at her from the bed with puffy, red-rimmed eyes, his nose swollen, his cheeks greasy with perspiration – and had hardly any money left.

'What on earth are you going out for?' he grumbled.

'That's my business,' she replied as she drew on her stockings. 'Look here! I'll need some cash.'

'Nothing doing!'

So far only the bathroom had been lit up, and the air in the bedroom seemed full of greyish dust. After fastening her black suspenders Sylvie switched on the light

and, while the scene outside the window blacked itself out, the objects in the room came into view

On the dressing-table, between two small pink-shaded lamps, were strewn silver-topped bottles, scent-sprays, all the dainty paraphernalia of a woman's toilet

He watched the whiteness of her breasts vanish beneath a gauzy silk chemise, and heard her voice again :

'You've a few hundred francs left, surely?'

'Why don't you sell that nugget of yours?' he muttered, blowing his nose.

The touch of the handkerchief on the inflamed skin was so painful that he had to take infinite precautions

'Don't be a fool! D'you imagine I'm going to part with *that*?'

He hadn't imagined anything. He had lost all power of imagination. All he knew was that he was perspiring freely, the bed-sheets drenched, his pyjamas sticking to his legs, and the light made his eyes smart .

They had met a fortnight before on board the *Théophile-Gautier* Sylvie was returning from Cairo, where she had been one of the show-girls in a cabaret. He was on his way from Istanbul to Paris, where he hoped to put through a deal in carpets – a million francs' worth, held up by the Customs, which he had undertaken to clear and to dispose of.

He was not the owner of these carpets; in fact, it might be a delicate task determining the ownership and reckoning the shares of all the parties concerned – assuming all went well For there were quite a dozen middlemen, at Pera, Athens, and even Paris, who had had a finger in the pie, and the negotiations had been dragging on for months. Nagear, who had business connexions in Brussels, had volunteered to see the transaction through, and displayed such assurance of success that he had been given an advance.

Also, they promised him two hundred thousand francs more, once he had cleared and sold the carpets.

Sylvie had started the voyage in the second-class. From the first day out four or five men were dancing attendance on her, and she stayed on deck after dinner till two or three in the morning.

And next day she moved into a first-class cabin. Who had paid the supplement? Not Elie in any case, as at that stage he hadn't got in touch with her. He succeeded in doing so only just before the ship reached Naples, where she told him she was going to get off.

He paid her passage on to Marseilles, took her with him to Paris, and then to Brussels. They had been there for three days now, and he had already discovered that the carpet venture was quite hopeless.

To make things worse he had fallen ill, and he had barely a thousand francs left. One eye hidden by the quilt, with the other he watched Sylvie smearing red on her lips.

'Really I don't see what you can want to do out of doors at this hour of the morning,' he said querulously.

'That's my business, as I told you just now.'

'Unless you're going to make a pass at that Dutchman ..'

'Why not?'

But he was only pretending to be jealous. On board ship it had been a different matter; there was keen competition between the men, and all the other passengers had watched their tactics with amused interest. Then, he had really felt jealous of his rivals.

But now — he knew her too well. He had seen her at her worst, in bed in the early morning, when the freckles under her eyes showed like angry blotches, and her features, in repose, betrayed their coarseness.

'Now then!' she said, drawing the tight skirt up over her hips. 'Hand over that money.'

He didn't move, even when she took his wallet from his coat-pocket. He watched her counting out four, five, six hundred-franc notes and slipping them into her bag. Trams were clanging up and down the Avenue, each with its one big headlight on.

'Shall I tell them to send you up some breakfast? ... Well, why don't you answer? What's come over you?'

No, he wouldn't answer. And the sight of that blood-shot eye peering at her made her feel uneasy, there was something malevolent in its fixity, and she would have given much to read his thoughts.

'See you later!' she said. He made no movement, while she flung a fur coat over her shoulders. 'You might at least say "*Au revoir*" to me,' she added, almost pleadingly.

After turning off the light in the bathroom, she hunted round for her gloves, then glanced out of the window at the dreary prospect.

'Have it your own way!' -

He too had changed. On the *Théophile-Gautier* she had been impressed by his smart appearance, and he had looked much younger than his age, which was thirty-five. He had jet-black hair and a rather prominent nose.

'Are you a Turk?' she had asked at their first meeting.

'Not really. I'm of Portuguese origin.'

She had found him good company, or, rather, he had a knack of making unexpected, cynical remarks, and seemed to have knocked about the world - and the half-world too. When she told him she was a dancer, he asked in which of the Cairo cabarets she had performed.

'At the *Tabarin*.'

'Ah, yes. A thousand francs a month, *plus* a rake-off on the fizz.'

That was so. Evidently he knew Cairo. He also knew Bucharest, where she had been, at *Maxim's*, for two months. He had amusing tales to tell about the men with whom she'd got off.

'You're rich, aren't you?'

'I shall draw two hundred thousand francs the day I reach Brussels.'

And now – all that was over. He was a sick man, on his beam ends – and ugly into the bargain! The glamour had departed.

'*Au revoir*'

She left her luggage in the bedroom. As she passed Van der Boomp's door she threw a quick glance at it and saw the letter-box crammed with fat Dutch newspapers.

Elie had hardly noticed when she went out. He stared at the ceiling, then at the window, then at the unlit lamps. He started to blow his nose, but the feel of the handkerchief on the raw skin made him wince. Beads of sweat were oozing from his chest and trickling along his ribs.

Sylvie was saying to the hall-porter:

'Call me a car, please.'

'A taxi?'

'Well, it's for the suburbs – Charleroi.'

'Oh, in that case I'll call up a car for hire, and you can fix a price with the chauffeur.'

All the lights were on in the lobby, and Sylvie whiled away the time inspecting the show-cases of local shops aligned along the walls. Presently she stepped into a car driven by a liveried chauffeur.

'Take me to the *Bon Marché* first.'

It was so dark outside that one could hardly believe the hour was noon. At the *Bon Marché* all the big globes of frosted glass were lit up. Gusts of icy air kept pouring

in through the revolving doors, and the girls behind the counters had woollies on under their black blouses

Sylvie seemed uncertain what she wanted. Finally she bought a pair of blue leather slippers, a pullover, two pipes, some artificial silk stockings, and a vanity bag. In her heavy furs she cut the figure of a wealthy lady, and when the girl followed her out, carrying the parcels to the car, she explained :

‘They’re presents’

The snow was holding in the woods bordering the Charleroi road, and it was colder here than in the city. The windows of the car grew misted, and Sylvie wiped them with her gloved hand. When the first collieries and miners’ cottages came in sight she pressed her forehead to the glass.

As the car was entering Charleroi she opened her bag, took out a mirror, and skilfully revived her make-up.

‘Turn left,’ she said. ‘Now left again. Cross the bridge. Then follow the tram-lines’

A rash of snow mottled the flanks of the tall black cones beside the coal-pits. The road was a long, dreary vista of mean houses, all exactly alike, their brick walls black with coal-dust. Now and then a line of skips travelling on an aerial cable rattled overhead, and sometimes a miniature train crawled across the road, preceded by a man with a red flag.

It was neither town nor country. Here and there the rows of houses gave place to what might have been a field, but on a closer view proved to be a pit-head. The air throbbed with the noise of engines; it was like driving through an immense factory.

‘Stop at Number Fifty-three’

There was nothing to distinguish it from the other houses. In the front window, between white lace curtains, stood a copper pot in which a nondescript green plant

languished. The chauffeur was about to ring when Sylvie said :

‘No. Bring the parcels.’

Peeping through the keyhole, she rattled the letter-box. A woman in her forties opened the door and, drying her hands on her blue apron, stared at the visitor

‘Don’t you recognize me, Ma?’

Sylvie kissed her. Her mother submitted to the kiss, showing no more emotion than a mild astonishment; then gazed at the parcels in the chauffeur’s arms.

‘What’s all them things?’

‘Oh, some little presents. ... Hand them over, Jacques. You can go and have your lunch now. Come back in an hour’s time.’

The kitchen door at the far end of the hall stood open, and a young man could be seen with his feet in the oven, a book propped on his knees

‘That’s Monsieur Moise,’ the woman said as she and Sylvie entered the kitchen. Then, with what seemed a slight reluctance, she explained to the young man : ‘This is my daughter, who’s just back from Egypt .. It *was* Egypt, wasn’t it, where you were last?’

But Moise had already edged his way past them and was hurrying upstairs

‘So you still have lodgers?’ Sylvie remarked.

‘How do you think we’d make both ends meet without ’em?’

A big saucepan was simmering on the range beside the coffee-pot, which was always kept full to the brim. Sylvie had dropped her coat across a chair and her mother was surreptitiously pawing the fur.

‘Why did you tell the driver to come back?’

‘Because I’ll have to be off again presently.’

‘Oh, will you?’

As she always did when somebody dropped in,

Madame Baion was pouring out a cup of coffee. She was in her working clothes; a shabby black dress, big blue apron. Sylvie unwrapped the slippers and handed them to her mother.

'Like them?'

Her mother sniffed and shook her head.

'What should I want with things like that? I'd look a proper guy in 'em.'

'Where's Antoinette?'

'Doing the rooms.'

No sooner had she spoken than Antoinette came down the stairs carrying a pail and a floorcloth. For a moment she stared at her sister, then exclaimed .

'Gosh!'

'What did you say?'

'I said "Gosh!" You *are* dolled up! Got a job in the movies?'

They dabbed their lips to each other's cheek. Antoinette's eyes fell on the blue slippers

'Are they for me?'

'Well, I'd meant them for Ma, but as she doesn't want them ... I've brought you some stockings and undies. Look!'

Sylvie opened the other parcels, but without much interest. A pipe rolled out and smashed on the floor.

'Will Pa be back soon?'

'Not till to-night. He's on the Ostend express now. You'll wait to see him, won't you?'

'Nothing doing to-day. But I'll be coming again.'

Her mother was eyeing her shrewdly. Perched on a chair, her sister had pulled up her skirt, displaying her thin legs, and was trying on the stockings. There was a smell of soup, a sound of water boiling, the comfortable drone of a well-fed fire.

'All your rooms let?'

'Didn't you see the card in the window? The ground-floor room's empty — the dearest one, needless to say. Nowadays foreigners don't seem to have no money. You saw Monsieur Moise just now; well, he has to come and study in the kitchen as he can't afford a fire in his room. Lay the table, Antoinette. We'll have a snack before the lodgers come.'

'So you still give them board?'

'There's two come every day for lunch. If I didn't feed 'em, they'd be always plaguing me for hot water to make coffee and boil eggs, and messing up their rooms with pots and pans.'

Madame Baron was a stout, short-legged woman. Antoinette, who was shorter and thinner than her elder sister, had a quaint, bird-like little face, pale-blue, laughing eyes.

'So you've taken to using rouge?' her elder sister observed

'Why shouldn't I? *You* make up all right.'

'It doesn't suit you. At your age ...'

'When you were my age you did lots of other things!'

Her mother was straining the soup on the corner of the range. Beyond the window was a small back-yard, and big drops of melted snow were dripping from the eaves.

*

Shielding his mouth with his hand, the porter at the *Palace* murmured into the telephone:

'Is that you, Monsieur Van der Cruyssen? There's a gentleman here, a Monsieur Blanqui, who would like to see you. Shall I send him up? ... Would you go up, sir? Room 413, Fourth Floor.'

Elie had managed to drag himself out of the sodden bed. His throat swathed in a muffler, slippers on his feet, he was prowling round the room, at a loose end. He had

heard someone talking on the phone in the next room. For some moments he stood at the window idly gazing at the snow-bound city, the pond in the Botanical Gardens, the three half-frozen swans. The din of trams and hooting cars jarred in his aching head.

‘Come in’

The voice was in the next room. On occasion the two bedrooms formed part of a suite, and there was only a locked door between them. The voices in the adjoining room could be heard as distinctly as the clanging of the trams.

‘Good morning, Monsieur Van der Cruyssen. Sorry to be so late, but I had to call in at the bank. ..’

Elie listened with half an ear. He felt hot and cold all over. It struck him that a hot bath might do him good, but he hadn’t the energy to set about it.

‘So you’ve decided to leave to-night?’ the voice went on.

‘Yes, I’m taking the last train to Paris. .. What will you have to drink? A glass of port?’

A voice could be heard giving an order down the telephone to the wine-waiter.

When that was done Elie followed suit. He, however, ordered a hot grog. Catching sight of his face in the looking-glass, he was appalled by its ugliness. But that might be because he hadn’t shaved, and the mauve scarf emphasized the sallowness of his skin, the dark half-moons under his eyes.

‘As you wished, I’ve taken the money in French notes.’

Elie bent down and put an eye to the keyhole. He saw a small man, who looked like an accountant or a broker, laying on the table ten bundles of notes.

‘Count them, please.’

Van der Cruyssen (Elie still thought of him as ‘Van der Boomp’) was in a black dressing-gown and scarlet

slippers. He counted the notes, flicking them expertly, like one who is used to handling large sums of paper money. Then he placed them in a pigskin attaché-case.

‘Come in.’

A waiter entered, carrying a bottle of port, another of rum, and a tumbler of hot water. These last were for Elie, who stepped back from the communicating door and, in his turn, called. ‘Come in.’

*

The midday meal was beginning at the Barons’. Madame Baron kept on her feet, waiting on her daughters and the lodgers, Domb and Valesco, who had just come back. The two young men eyed Sylvie with frank admiration. She seemed amused by the impression she was making and her sister’s furious glances in her direction.

‘Do you know Bucarest?’ asked Plutarc Valesco, who was a Rumanian.

‘I should just think I do! What’s more, I know nearly all your cabinet ministers.’

‘A delightful place, isn’t it?’

‘Not too bad – only everybody’s stony-broke ...’

*

Sitting on the arm of an easy-chair, Elie sipped his hot grog and gazed down at the Avenue, swarming now with the lunch-hour crowd. Tiny snowflakes were beginning to float down from the sullen yellow sky.

‘*Au revoir* then. Hope you’ll have a good time at Paris.’

‘Thanks. See you next Wednesday.’

There followed a sound of running taps in Van der Boomp’s bathroom.

Nightfall came early, at half-past three, and found Elie lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling, which was

dappled with roving gleams thrown up from the street below

At four the hall-porter saw him going out, and noticed that he hadn't shaved. In fact, he had an unusually bedraggled appearance, perhaps because he hadn't troubled to get out a clean shirt and collar.

'If Madame comes back while you're out, sir, is there any message?'

'No, thanks. I'll be back presently.'

His cheeks were flushed; he looked like a man in the last stages of consumption

*

The headlights lit up a drab expanse of muddy road and the low branches of the dripping trees. The window behind the chauffeur's seat was open and he said to Sylvie over his shoulder :

'I've a brother living at Marcinelles, quite near Charleroi. I thought you wouldn't be in a hurry, so I looked him up '

'What's his job?'

'Oh, nothing much. He's employed at the gasworks.'

As they neared Brussels there were lighted cafés fringing the road, and the car skirted refuges on which loomed the dark, white-helmeted forms of traffic policemen.

'Monsieur Nagear has just gone out,' the porter told Sylvie as she walked towards the lift.

'Oh? Did he leave any message?'

At eight he was still out, and she went down to the grill-room to dine. Van der Boomp was at a table nearby, and she noticed that he kept on trying to catch her eye as she ate the lobster mayonnaise of which her repast consisted. But, to her surprise, when she went out and started strolling about the lobby, lingering in front of

the show-cases, he did not come up and speak to her.

She went up to the bedroom, and after a while there was a sound of suitcases being closed in the next room, and she heard Van de Boomp say to the valet.

'No, the places in the sleeping-cars are all booked up. A first-class *couchette*, please. Get me one facing the engine if you can.'

She changed her dress lackadaisically; she was feeling tired and, perhaps, a little depressed. There was still no sign of Elie. She counted the money remaining in her bag—a hundred and fifteen francs.

Still undecided what to do, she walked to the lift. Near the street door she paused, to hand the room-key to the porter.

'A shame, isn't it, that he's leaving,' the man remarked familiarly.

'Why?'

'He asked me who you were. Mighty struck on you, he is, that Dutchman. But he can't stand the sight of Monsieur Nagear.'

She shrugged her shoulders and leant forward for him to light her cigarette. Van der Boomp emerged from the lift, hesitated for a moment, then went up to the porter, saying to Sylvie:

'Excuse me.'

'So you're leaving us to-night, sir?'

'I have to.' He emphasized the words, looking straight at Sylvie; then handed the man some crumpled notes he had been holding ready for him. 'But I'll be back next week.'

He took a few steps forward, hesitated again, and finally, with a vague wave of his hand, stepped out on to the pavement.

'He's a business man from Amsterdam,' the porter informed Sylvie. 'Rolling in it, I should say. He comes

here every Wednesday. So if you're still here next week ...'

Her eyelashes fluttered. But all she said was :

'When Monsieur Nagear comes back, say I'm at the *Merryland*. ... No, don't tell him anything. That'll teach him a lesson! Page! Call me a taxi, please.'

The snow was coming down steadily now, in big flakes that melted immediately they touched the pavement. Trains were whistling, a hundred yards away, in the Gare du Nord

II

It was while he was standing on the pavement in the Rue Neuve, jostled by the crowd and gazing into a tobacconist's window, with a shrill-voiced urchin hawking lottery tickets at his elbow, that it suddenly dawned on Elie how very far he had travelled since leaving his home in Istanbul. The tobacconist's window was packed with boxes of cigars and cigarettes of every brand, and amongst the latter he saw some white boxes bearing the name 'Abdullah'.

At Pera the most fashionable restaurant in the main thoroughfare is likewise called *Abdullah*. On the eve of his departure Elie had dined there with friends. He knew almost everyone, shook hands at every table.

'I'm off to France to-morrow.'

'Lucky devil!'

And now, standing at the corner of the Rue Neuve, his hands in his overcoat pockets, try as he might, somehow he couldn't recall the *Abdullah* restaurant. Not that he had any trouble in remembering its appearance. But that was not what he was after. He wanted to recapture the atmosphere and, still more, his mood that evening

Why, for instance, had he set out on this long journey

though he had guessed from the start that the deal in carpets was bound to fail? And why had he pretended to be so cocksure, telling everybody he knew, with a triumphant air

‘I’m on to a good thing, and I’m sailing for Marseilles to-morrow’?

All along the main street of Pera, where people were strolling in the cool of the evening, he had buttonholed acquaintances and imparted the great news

Now, all that seemed so remote, so unreal, that he could fancy it a dream. Reality was the here and now slushy pavements, a biting wind, fever, a sore nose, a dull ache between his shoulder-blades.

He entered the tobacconist’s.

‘A packet of Turkish cigarettes, please.’

The small blue jet of a gas cigar-lighter danced before his eyes. The tobacconist was pink and plump. Dark forms scudded past outside the window. A packet was handed him

‘Those aren’t Turks.’

‘They’re Egyptian. Much better.’

‘There’s no tobacco in Egypt.’

‘No tobacco in Egypt! That’s a good one!’

‘It’s a fact,’ he said to the fat Belgian, who was glaring at him indignantly. ‘What you call Egyptian tobacco is all imported from Turkey and Bulgaria.’

Wondering what had possessed him to tell the man all this, he stepped out of the shop, plunged again into the crowd, and walked, or rather splashed his way, ahead. Now and again he halted in front of a shop-window, usually one with a mirror, in which he could take stock of his appearance.

He was wearing a camel-hair overcoat, an elegant felt hat, a well-cut suit

Why did he suddenly strike himself as a pitiable sight?

Was it because of a two-days' growth of beard, or his red, swollen nose and puffy cheeks? In any case, he was shocked by the face confronting him – like death warmed up', he muttered with a wry smile. When someone brushed against him, he winced and gave a stifled cry, as if he had been dealt a blow.

He was looking for a jeweller's, but passed three before finally turning into one. There he placed on the counter a lump of gold shaped like a walnut – Sylvie's 'nugget'. She had carried it about with her everywhere on her travels during the last two years, as a stand-by in case she were stranded in some foreign town.

The jeweller gave him thirteen hundred Belgian francs for it, and Elie found himself back in the street with many empty hours before him.

He could recall nothing of the voyage to Marseilles; or, rather, he remembered it as if it had been an experience in a previous life, or something in a book. Nothing had reality for him but this bleak darkness of unfriendly streets, this alien city of Brussels with its narrow pavements off which he had to step at every moment to avoid bumping into someone, these shop-windows so chock-full of food that it made his gorge rise to see them, cafés with livid marble-topped tables that looked like fallen tombstones. . .

He wasn't thinking. I'll do this; then I'll do that. Yet he had a feeling he was about to do something, and he had a notion what that something was. He was in a quarrelsome mood; he'd shown it already over the 'Egyptian' cigarettes. Now he showed it again over a hot grog.

He had entered a café in the Place de Brouckère. The room reminded him of the big waiting-hall at a railway terminus. In the centre stood an enormous tankard of beer, twenty feet high, brimming over with white froth,

and round it some two or three hundred people were seated at small tables. A band was playing; there was a constant clatter of mugs and saucers. Waiters were dashing to and fro

Elie ordered a hot grog.

'Our grogs are made with wine, sir.'

'I want one with rum'

'It's against the law to sell spirits in quantities of less than a quart'

'All right Give me a quart of rum.'

'This is a café, not a wine-merchant's'

'Oh, go to the devil!'

To make things worse, the lights in the room were so bright that they made his eyes smart, and there was no shelter from the glare. After some moments he walked out. When he entered the street his fingers made the movement of clenching something in his pocket. In the Boulevard Adolphe-Max he stopped in front of an ironmonger's shop, the windows of which were full of tools as highly polished as the silverware in a jeweller's show-window. Going up to the shopman, he said without the least hesitation :

'I want a spanner.'

He chose a very large one, and swung it to gauge its weight as if it were a hammer, not a spanner. It was of an American make, and it cost him sixty-two francs

He was sweating freely under his greatcoat. And at the same time he was shivering with cold. It was the same with his hunger; he felt ravenous, but every time he started to enter a restaurant or a pastrycook's he felt nauseated.

'All the winning numbers of the national lottery! All the winners!'

The crowds in the street gave him the impression of a demented herd, stampeding in all directions. He gazed

at the portraits of film-stars in the lobbies of picture-houses and remembered having met one of them at Istanbul; he was one of a group of young men who had shown her round the town one evening. But that, too, seemed like an incident in a half-forgotten dream.

He knew what time the train left, but went to the station just to make sure. Yes; 12 33

At midnight the station was empty, dimly lit and full of greyish dust, as sweepers were at work.

'Paris First-class'

'Return, sir?'

He hesitated. He hadn't thought of that.

'Yes, a return, please.'

He halted beside the handcart of the woman hiring pillows, and took two of them, and a blanket. There were only ten people on the platform waiting for the train. The station was strangely quiet. Far down the line an engine was shunting, in a maze of red and yellow light. Sudden gusts of cold wind swept the platform.

Elie noticed a porter from the *Palace* keeping a place in one of the *courette* sleepers, entered the same compartment, placed his pillows and blanket on the opposite seat, and sat down.

He was quite calm.

As he stepped into the carriage Van der Boomp gave Elie a quick glance, and presumably recognized him as the young man he had seen at the cabaret. But he took no more notice of him.

There were four berths, two lower and two upper, but as they were the only passengers in the carriage, the upper ones were not let down. It was pure chance that there were so few passengers — but Elie felt no surprise. It was as if he had foreknown everything.

Van der Boomp began by putting the attaché-case under his pillow. Then he opened a valise, took from it

a navy-blue smoking-jacket, a pair of travelling-slippers, and a bottle of Spa water

He was a heavily built man, with a blotchy complexion and fair hair, thinning over the temples.

‘Tickets, please’

The train was starting. When Van der Boomp held out his ticket the guard remarked.

‘Were the sleeping-cars full, sir?’

He evidently knew the Dutchman, and addressed him with respectful familiarity. He hardly glanced at Elie as he punched his ticket.

‘Good night, gentlemen’

Before leaving the carriage he drew down the blinds.

In his smoking-jacket and slippers Van der Boomp went off to the lavatory, taking his attaché-case with him, under his arm. On his return he stretched himself on the berth, took a mouthful of the mineral water, and gargled before swallowing it; then placed the bottle on the floor beside him, within easy reach.

After a final glance at Elie, who was lying, fully dressed, on the opposite berth, he had moved the lighting switch over to the night-lamp. The train was gathering speed, and though the carriage was overheated, icy draughts were forcing their way through invisible chinks.

Elie’s right hand was clenched on the big spanner, but actually his mind was void of thoughts. Through half-closed eyes he could see the bulb of the blue night-lamp overhead, bathing the carriage in a dim, spectral light.

The noises of the train settled down into a steady rhythm, with a ground-bass of low-pitched rumblings, like the pedal-notes of an organ.

Van der Boomp’s mouth was open and he was breathing heavily, with an occasional snore. One of his hands dangled over the side of the berth: a chubby, pink hand

on whose fingers glinted a gold wedding-ring and a signet-ring in platinum

Elie's gaze settled on the wedding-ring, but it conveyed nothing to his mind. A sudden draught made him turn up the collar of his camel's-hair coat, and he began to perspire heavily.

The train slowed down. There was a sound of voices, hurried footsteps, and yellow light came in spurts through the chinks beside the blinds, while a voice could be heard above the din, shouting out the name of the station.

'Mons!'

A panting woman scrambled into another compartment in the same coach and could be heard slamming her baggage on to the rack.

Elie awoke when someone flung the door open and called:

'Frontier! All passports ready, please!'

Propped on an elbow, Van der Boomp held his out

'Thank you, sir.'

Elie showed his and the man flicked the leaves over with a careless finger

'Thank you'

The train started and stopped again.

'Feignes Junction. All change for ..'

Another man entered the compartment, and switched on the white light.

'French Customs. Have you anything to declare?'

Van der Boomp was less flushed, now that the door had been opened several times and the heat in the carriage reduced. But he still looked half-dazed, though he was awake enough to hold out a cigar-case containing six fat cigars.

'Right. Nothing else? What's in that suitcase?'

'Clothes — none of them new.'

Elie, who had no luggage, held out his box of cigarettes. The Customs officer retired and shut the door.

There was a hubbub of voices, shouts, footsteps, on the platform. An agitated woman could be heard enquiring shrilly of a porter

‘Is the train leaving at once?’

‘No, not till thirty-two past. ..’

Elie lay down again, after switching off the white light. Van der Boomp seemed to have trouble in getting off to sleep and changed his position several times. But after a quarter of an hour or so, he started snoring again.

Elie’s eyes were open. His hands were so wet that he could hardly grip the spanner, which was coated with a film of sweat. He kept his eyes fixed on the small lamp-bulb overhead, the filaments of which showed white through the blue glass.

When the train rounded certain bends his body pressed against the wall of the carriage, while that of the Dutchman seemed on the point of rolling on to the floor.

He turned down his coat-collar, but the draught on his neck compelled him to put it up again.

‘Saint-Quentin! Next stop Compiègne!’

He slipped out of the carriage into the corridor and encountered a blast of icy wind, as one of the windows was open. On the dark horizon glimmered the street-lamps of a sleeping town.

‘It hasn’t snowed here,’ Elie murmured

He paced the corridor from end to end. The blinds were down in all the carriages. He visited the lavatory, but the tension of his nerves was such that he could do no more than look at his reflexion in the glass.

When he got back to the compartment the train was moving again. Van der Boomp was still snoring, the leather attaché-case beneath his head faintly creaking under its weight.

Elie lit a cigarette. The match-flame did not evoke the slightest tremor on the sleeper's face.

It was impossible to say at what moment he finally nerved himself to do it. He took some puffs of his cigarette and the smoke had a peculiar flavour that he recognized at once – the taste it always had when he was suffering from a cold. He shot a quick glance at the blinds screening them from the corridor.

The spanner had warmed up to the temperature of his hand. The express was travelling full speed across a stretch of open country. Without rising altogether from the seat he wriggled forward to its extreme edge. For a moment he held the spanner poised in air, taking aim at the centre of the man's skull. Then brought it down with all his might.

What happened was so grotesque that he felt like breaking into hysterical laughter. Very slowly the Dutchman's eyelids parted. The pupils came into view. And the look that wavered up through the dim blue light was one of blank surprise, the look of a man who can't imagine why he has been roused from sleep. And yet a trickle of blood was creeping forward through his hair, spreading across his forehead.

He tried to raise his head, to see what was happening. Elie struck again, twice, three times, ten times, infuriated by those mild, insensate eyes staring up at him.

He stopped only when his arm grew tired and he hadn't the strength to raise it again. The spanner dropped from his moist fingers, clanged on the floor. He leant back on the cushions, gazing dully in front of him, and took breath. And, while he did so, he listened intently. Was there the sound of another's breathing, besides his own, in the carriage? Fervently he hoped not! His wrist was still aching, he had no desire to start again. ...

Without looking at the body, he went to a window and let it down, after releasing the blind. There had been no snow at Saint-Quentin, but here, he noticed, the fields were white as far as the eye could reach, and the sky had a frosty sheen

His overcoat kept getting in his way and he flung it off. Then, trying not to look at the Dutchman's head, he raised the body, intending to heave it out of the window on to the line. He made three attempts. Contrary to all his preconceived ideas, the body was limp, and folded up when he tried to move it.

When Elie finally let go, the upper part of the body was trailing on the floor, while the legs remained on the berth

And then a panic haste came over him. He put on his overcoat, opened the attaché-case, and thrust the bundles of notes into his pockets. He couldn't bear to stay a moment longer in the carriage. Without even stopping to close the window he hurried out into the corridor. As he walked through the concertina vestibule leading to the next coach a rush of icy air enveloped him and he saw blobs of ice on the iron stanchions.

From coach to coach he made his way the full length of the train, only stopping when he came to the door of the luggage-van

Only then the thought occurred to him: 'I forgot to shut the window. Someone will see him when we get to Compiègne'

The blinds were drawn everywhere and he didn't dare to enter any of the carriages. Finally he shut himself up in a lavatory, where the light was so bright that it made his eyes smart. He looked round for a switch to turn it off, but couldn't find one. There was a mirror over the basin and, try as he might, he could not help gazing at his face.

'I forgot to shut the window . . I forgot to shut the window ... I forgot . .' The words kept echoing in his head, timing themselves to the thudding of the wheels

'And when we get to Compiègne ... When we get to Compiègne . '

He put down the lid and sat on it, crossing his legs and leaning back against the wall.

When the train stopped he jumped up with a start, for he had fallen asleep. He heard shouts on the platform. But he was too worn out to move. Every limb was aching and he could feel the fever of his blood. After a few minutes the train started again.

'When we get to Compiègne . .' No, that was silly. They had just left Compiègne. In an hour they would be at Paris.

He had no plans. He didn't even try to concoct one. All he wanted was to lie down and sleep. But that absurd jingle was running in his fuddled brain: 'I forgot to shut the window . And when we get to Compiègne . .'

By now they must be quite near Paris, crossing the outer suburbs. With a great effort he struggled to his feet, went out of the lavatory and pressed his face to a window. Blocks of tall, five-storey apartment-houses loomed up beside the line, against a background of vague fields. There were some lighted windows, probably those of rooms where workers lived, who had to make an early start.

No one was in the corridor. Then a railway employee appeared at the far end and walked past without looking at him. The glass was so cold that he took his forehead from it; it seemed to be freezing his brain.

'I forgot to shut the window . . to shut the window. ...'

Someone dived into the lavatory and the door hit Elie in the back. There was a sound of running water. A

woman came up and tried to open the door, in spite of the notice '*Engaged*'

Then came a series of tunnels. Elie had a brief glimpse of a brightly lighted tramcar swinging up a muddy street. Here, too, there was no snow.

A countrywoman, laden with bundles, stepped out into the corridor and took her stand beside him. The train was slowing down; it was entering the Gare du Nord and its rumble swelled to a hollow roar under the high vaulted roof.

Before it stopped Elie opened the door and halted on the step. The woman behind him tapped him on the shoulder.

'Take care!'

He jumped off, but he was not the first to alight. Already a passenger was hurrying to the Way Out, suitcase in hand. The ticket-collector took his ticket without a word. Looking round, Elie saw another train, which people were entering, on the next platform. On a notice-board fastened to the side of a third-class carriage he read: '*Namur, Liège, Cologne, Berlin.*'

No one was watching him.

He took no thought, but started running. The train was beginning to draw out. He opened a door, swung himself in and sank on to a seat of a third-class carriage in which were two women, drinking coffee from a thermos flask.

All one side of the carriage was empty, and he stretched himself full-length on the seat, wrapping his camel-hair coat around him. When he awoke, day had dawned. A railway employee was tugging at his shoulder.

'Ticket, please.'

The two women, who were in black, looked at him, smiling. His ticket? For some moments he was at a loss.

Then he remembered the man at the Brussels booking-office who had asked 'Return, sir?'

He felt in his pockets. His fingers groped amongst the wads of notes. Under them he found a small square of cardboard.

The guard looked at the ticket, then at the passenger.

'This is a first-class ticket,' he said.

Obviously Elie gave him a smile that seemed to say, 'How silly of me!' And the two women understood now why he was wearing such an expensive-looking greatcoat.

'The third coach, towards the engine,' the man said. 'If you stay here you'll have to get out for the Customs inspection. First-class passengers are inspected in the train.'

His lips were parched, and he had developed a stiff neck. The draught, most likely. He stumbled up the swaying corridor, and, pausing for a moment, saw snow-bound fields dotted here and there with cottages and farm-houses, smoke rising from the chimneys.

As he crossed the metal plates between the coaches he was greeted by blasts of bitterly cold air. There was an empty first, and the carriage had a lugubrious, almost sinister appearance in the bleak, grey light.

What could the time be? Were they near the frontier? The words started running in his head again. 'When we get to Compiègne... When we get to Compiègne...'

At all costs he must have a drink. He hurried to a lavatory. The basin was black with soot. He turned the small tap to the right and there was a gush of boiling water. He turned it to the left and there came a trickle of tepid, muddy water, which he cupped in his hand and brought to his lips. It left a taste of grime and fever in his mouth.

The train stopped and Elie hastened out, afraid of being discovered in the lavatory, and bumped into a man in a grey overcoat.

'Were you in this coach?'

‘Well ... yes.’

‘Your passport, please. Thank you. Anything to declare? Any jewellery, valuables, new clothes?’

Elie shook his head.

He was half asleep. His clothes were soiled and crumpled. His handkerchief was a sodden, grimy ball.

Jeumont. Erquelines. Red-brick houses. Windows with snow-white curtains, ferns in copper pots. Public-houses. *Café de la Gare. Estaminet*. Khaki uniforms instead of blue.

And always, parallel with the line, the Meuse, with long strings of barges towed by stocky little tugs, whistling impatiently at the lock-gates.

The door of the compartment opened. A young man in dark uniform enquired:

‘Breakfast, sir? Breakfast will be served immediately after Namur.’

On the point of saying ‘No,’ Elie took the small red ticket that was handed him, reserving a seat in the dining-car.

He got out at Namur. At last he knew the time. The big station-clock, with a garishly white dial and hands so black that they seemed painted in indian ink, informed him it was eleven.

‘When’s the next train to Brussels?’

‘Twelve-ten.’

He was too exhausted to go out of the station, and settled down in the third-class waiting-room, where there were most people. Everyone had a dripping umbrella, and the floor was covered with puddles; even the varnished wooden benches had a coat of moisture.

On the far side of a glazed door white-aproned waiters were hurrying to and fro, and tables were laid. But Elie didn’t feel like sitting down to a meal. He went up to the buffet and pointed to a pile of sandwiches.

'A *pistolet*?' asked the plump young woman behind the counter

'A "*pistolet*"?' he asked irritably 'What the devil do you mean?'

'That's what we call 'em here, in Belgium.'

'Why can't you call them "sandwiches", like everybody else? . All right, I'll take three '

But he only managed to get through half a sandwich as he paced up and down the third-class waiting-room

It was dark by the time the train reached Brussels, and at first he didn't recognize the station, for the train had come in at an unfamiliar platform Outside snow was falling, or rather the air was thick with melting flakes. Hotel porters were waiting at the Exit

'*Astoria Palace Grand Hotel* ... A taxi, sir?'

He made a detour so as not to pass the man from the *Palace*. Avoiding the main thoroughfares, he turned to the left, then to the left again, and found himself in a tangle of mean streets, lined with cafés and fried-fish shops

At last he entered a café where people were sitting with cups of coffee and mugs of beer in front of them, waiting for trains apparently, as most of them had luggage.

'Have you a telephone?'

'Yes, over there on the right. You can get a counter at the cash-desk '

But what was he to do with the counter that was handed him? In Turkish cafés counters aren't used . . Yet when he thought of Turkey it seemed no more than a name – the name of a country in which he'd never set foot. He held the disk up enquiringly

'I see. You're a foreigner. What number do you want?'

'The *Palace Hotel*, please.'

Elie picked up the receiver.

'Is that the *Palace*? I want to talk to Mademoiselle

Sylvie. What? She's out? .. I'll ring up again presently. No; no message.'

He was longing for a hot grog, and his desire for one had grown to an obsession. But there was nothing to be done; he resigned himself to drinking a glass of beer in a corner of the café near the telephone-box. There was a clock almost in front of him, above the bar of polished oak. When half an hour had passed he rang up again; then again after another half-hour.

At eight, when he rang up for the sixth time, a voice said to him

'I think I saw Mademoiselle Sylvie in the grill-room. Hold the line, please.'

He pictured the *Palace* grill-room with its pink-shaded lamps on the tables, flowers in cut-glass vases, the side-board glistening with silver, and the big dinner-wagon on which the head-waiter now was trundling from table to table the day's joint.

'Hullo? Who's there?'

With his mind's eye he could see the telephone-box beside the reading-room, with its big notice on the glass door *No Smoking*.

'Hullo?' she called again impatiently

He felt sure that she was wearing her green silk dress, which was so tight round the hips that he had to help her into it.

'Hullo?'

He had to say something. ...

'It's I,' he whispered into the receiver.

'What! You're back, Elie? And high time too! Why haven't you come to the hotel?'

'Ssh! Can't tell you now, I'll explain. I want you to come and meet me here. I'm at a café near the station. ... Just a moment.'

He ran out of the cabin and buttonholed a waiter.

‘What’s the name of this place?’

‘*Au Bon Départ.*’

Back at the phone he said :

‘*Au Bon Départ.* That’s the name You’ll find it easily.
But finish your dinner first ’

She gave a little grunt, then murmured sulkily :

‘All right, I’ll come.’

And by now she must be crossing the lobby, wondering what on earth he had to tell.

‘Can I have something to eat?’ he asked a man who seemed to be the owner of the café

‘There’s only ham and white pudding ’

He was too hungry to trouble what the food was like. After drinking off a beer at a gulp he wolfed what was set in front of him. If now and then he made a wry face, it was only because of twinges in his stiff neck.

Not once in all the day had he given a thought to the late Van der Boomp.

III

SYLVIE drew back hastily. She had just paid the taxi-man, after an upward glance to make sure the name above the café entrance was the right one. *Au Bon Départ* As she was stepping across a puddle on the pavement a dark form moved out of a patch of shadow beside the lighted doorway, and a voice whispered . ‘Sylvie!’

The yellow greatcoat and the voice reassured her. It was Elie. But, even before she saw his face, she had a feeling that in some way he was changed.

Indeed, so impressed was she that she followed him in the rain, without a word of protest, and down a narrow side-street into a dismal and deserted part of the town where she had never been before.

Under the first street-lamp she shot a keen glance at

him, and noticed that he turned his head away

'You do look a sight!' she exclaimed. 'Why haven't you shaved?'

They moved out of the little pool of light and had another fifty yards to walk before coming to the next lamp. The lamps were spaced out at that distance all the way down the street; the only additional light came from a small confectioner's shop some way ahead.

Sylvie wrapped her fur coat more tightly round her. Her high heels made walking difficult, and she could feel drops of muddy water splashing her stockings and oozing through the silk.

'Have we far to go?'

He looked back over his shoulder. There was no one about. A piano was tinkling in an upper room, a pink glow seeping through the curtains.

'Let's go a bit farther,' he said.

He could hardly drag himself along. At one moment he linked his arm in Sylvie's, but it was no help. Perhaps they weren't walking in step, or Sylvie, hugging her fur coat to her, had her arm at the wrong angle.

She kept watching him from the corner of an eye. She had guessed that it was something serious. ..

'Where have you been?' She realized he couldn't bring himself to speak first.

'To Paris.'

He could not have explained why the rain seemed to make talking difficult, but so it was. Then he saw a dark porch some ten yards from a street-lamp, and drew her under its shelter. But he didn't kiss her, or take her in his arms. In any case, her furs were beaded with big drops of rain.

After inspecting the street in both directions he drew a handful of notes from his pocket and showed them to the girl in gloomy silence.

She didn't realize at once, and fingered the notes incredulously.

'How much?' she asked after a brief silence.

'A hundred thousand '

She was staring not at his face but at his overcoat.

'In the train . . . ?'

They could hardly see each other. The drizzle made a haze, like a teeming cloud of gnats, round the street-lamp.

'Yes Van der Boomp '

She raised her eyes slowly, taken aback, but not over-much, and there was an unspoken question in her gaze.

'Yes,' he repeated, while in his pocket his fingers made the movement of gripping a spanner.

The wet street stretched out to infinity, grey and gleaming in the patches of lamplight

'How about moving on?' Sylvie suggested

Their footsteps echoed in the emptiness between the rows of houses, all exactly alike.

'It's in the newspapers, I expect,' he said

'You haven't looked at them?' She sounded surprised.

He shook his head, and she guessed he hadn't dared to buy one. There was no need for him to speak. She knew that he expected her to help him; that was why he had returned to Brussels. And she knew that he was waiting. ...

'They're sure to be watching the frontiers,' she murmured, as if to herself. Then added more loudly: 'It's no use hanging about here. See those lights over there? There's bound to be a café of sorts.'

His arms dangling at his side, he followed her down the street. She seemed to be thinking hard. Before coming to the place where the lights were she halted for a moment.

‘Fifty-fifty.’

He understood at once and handed her the contents of one pocket, about half the money he had stolen. She put the notes in her bag.

‘Oh, they’re French notes,’ she remarked casually.

They came to a sleepy-looking café; the two billiard-tables at which nobody was playing made the room seem emptier still. The proprietor was seated by the window, chatting with a fat, red-cheeked man; his wife was knitting at the cash-desk.

‘This’ll do.’

So homely was the atmosphere in the café, that it was like breaking in on a family party. When they walked across the room and settled down behind a billiard-table, the proprietor heaved an audible sigh and rose lethargically from his chair.

‘What can I get you?’

Sylvie ordered two coffees.

From now on it was she who took command; both of them seemed to accept this as a matter of course. Elie was staring at the floor, on which sawdust lay in ripples like sand on a sea-beach. When Sylvie rose to her feet he looked up, but didn’t ask what she was about to do. She went up to a rack on which were some newspapers rolled round strips of wood.

The man served them in silence. The coffee fell drop by drop from the nickel-plated percolator resting on each cup. The apoplectic-looking customer blew his nose noisily.

There was a rustle of paper as Sylvie turned a sheet of the newspaper she was reading. She looked up to say :

‘Put two lumps of sugar in my cup, please.’

He did so, then drank his coffee to keep himself in countenance

‘Now – pay,’ she said.

The proprietor was eyeing them from his seat by the window, obviously wondering why these two young people had dropped in at such an hour. Sylvie rose, and Elie followed her out. After halting on the pavement to take her bearings, she started off towards the central area.

‘Well?’

‘The guard gave your description, but he doesn’t seem to have noticed much, except that you were wearing a yellow overcoat.’

And promptly Elie felt as if his overcoat were made of lead and looked anxiously round to make sure no one was watching him.

‘Another thing he said was that you’d a foreign accent – but he didn’t say what sort of accent.’

As they walked on Elie transferred the notes, his handkerchief, and a penknife from his overcoat pockets to those of his coat. Beside a fence running alongside a field used as a rubbish-dump he paused and turned to Sylvie.

‘Here?’

‘No. If it’s found they’ll know you are in Brussels. You’d better drop it in the canal.’

‘Where’s that?’

‘Oh, quite a way from here.’

From time to time a tramcar sped by, packed with seated, stolid figures, like museum-pieces in a show-case.

‘We’d better have a taxi,’ Sylvie said.

‘Think it’s safe?’

‘Yes. I know the trick.’

She hailed the first taxi that passed and said to the driver, with an affected smirk

‘Take us to the Cambre woods. Drive slowly, please.’

That way he’d take them for a loving couple. There was no light in the taxi, which creaked at every joint.

Elie slipped out of his overcoat — after which neither of them made the least movement.

‘Is there water?’ he asked under his breath

‘Yes, a big pond. You’ll have to put stones in the pockets to make sure of its sinking.’

The woods were completely empty. From the leafless branches overhead big drops flashed down before the headlights. After they had gone a mile or so Sylvie tapped on the sliding window between her and the driver, and the car stopped.

‘We’re going for a stroll. We’ll be back in five minutes.’

The driver hesitated, swung his shoulders round and bent towards her, whispering something Elie failed to catch. As they walked away he asked what the man had said.

‘Oh, he suggested we should stay in the taxi while *he* went for a walk.’

But neither smiled. They groped about for stones. For appearance’s sake Sylvie had linked her arm in Elie’s. She prodded a big stone with the toe of her shoe.

‘Pick it up.’

It was chilly in the wood, and in his grey suit Elie felt the cold. His teeth were chattering. The darkness was heavy with the fumes of sodden earth and leaves.

‘That one too. ... Put your arm round me. He may be watching.’

They climbed over the low railings round the pond. The ground fell away towards the water. Sylvie held Elie’s hand while he bent forward as far as he could. There was only a faint splash, but they looked round nervously. The driver might have followed them, suspecting suicide.

They started back, Elie in front. Sylvie plucked at his sleeve.

‘Not so fast. We don’t look like a loving couple.’

In the taxi she said, as if it had just struck her :

'Feeling cold?'

'A bit. But it doesn't matter.'

His lips were blue. Now and again his shoulders shook convulsively, and to make things worse, he was continually rubbing against Sylvie's sodden fur coat

'Now I'll tell you what to do,' she said in a low tone. 'You must take the train to Charleroi . . '

He shook his head emphatically.

'I won't take a train.'

'Well, a car if you prefer. When you get to Charleroi go to Number Fifty-three, Rue du Laveu; it's a house where they let furnished rooms. I happen to know that there's one vacant.'

He looked at her wonderingly, but put no question

'My people live there,' Sylvie explained. 'You can tell Mother that it's I who sent you. You'd better say you've got into trouble in your country – over politics, or something like that – and want to lie low for a bit. Pay three months in advance. That way Mother'll keep her mouth shut if the police come snooping round.'

They were back in Brussels, and the driver kept looking round, waiting to be told where to go

'To the *Merryland* cabaret,' Sylvie said

'But – but I can't go in like this.'

'Of course not. You mustn't come with me. But I've got to go there. I've an appointment.'

He made no protest. Docile as a child, he let her decide for him. However, he ventured to ask .

'Will you be staying in Brussels?'

'Yes, but I'll come to see you.' She puckered her brows, thinking hard. 'Listen! Perhaps you'd better not tell Mother I sent you. Pretend not to know me. Once you've given her the money you won't have any bother.'

'But how shall I get news of you?'

'I'll write now and then to ~~Antoinette~~ ~~She's my sister~~. She'll talk about my letters t-meals, and you'll all eat at the same table.'

The taxi stopped. The ~~Meirvana~~ ~~commissionaire~~ opened the door and held a big umbrella over Sylvie as she stepped out. Sitting well back in the far corner, Elie was almost invisible.

'*Au revoir*,' said Sylvie.

She didn't kiss him. Bending forward, but with her head outside the door, she groped with her hand for his, and shook it hastily.

For want of any better address to give, Elie told the driver to take him to the station.

Strutting on her absurdly high heels, the fur coat drawn tightly round her hips, Sylvie crossed the pavement under cover of the big umbrella. A burst of dance-music came with the opening door, and shadowy forms could be seen gliding too and fro behind the curtains.

In the brightly lit entrance Sylvie turned and waved to him. The driver let in the gear. It was cold inside the taxi and, huddled up in his corner without his overcoat, Elie felt as if he had nothing on.

'Station's shut.' The driver pointed to the dark vestibule in which most of the lamps had been turned off.

'That doesn't matter.'

A sudden panic came over him; he had just realized that besides the thousand-franc notes he had only some small change. But after hunting in his pockets he scraped together enough to pay the taximan.

But it meant that he couldn't spend any more money till next morning. There was nowhere to go, eating and drinking were ruled out – and the night was getting steadily colder.

He was so benumbed that he had ceased being conscious of the cold. He walked on and on, now and then

halting in a doorway, but always hurrying away the moment he heard footsteps. After a while he marked down four big clocks at different points, and kept moving in a circle, reckoning out how many rounds he would have made before daybreak. He had only the sound of his own steps for company, but, for all their regularity, they afforded some distraction, as the echo varied with the different streets. It depended on the width of the roadway, the height of the houses, and perhaps on the kind of paving-stones employed as well.

Meanwhile Sylvie was dancing at the *Merryland*. He wasn't in the least jealous, though he knew she was having what she regarded as a good time. There was nothing to prevent his lying in wait and watching her come out, but it never occurred to him to do so.

It was a relief when the first tram made its appearance in the streets, and at seven he chose a taxi from those in the rank at the Place de Brouckère.

'Drive me to Charleroi.'

He had a three-days' growth of beard. The shoulders of his coat were drenched and the bottoms of his trouser-legs a limp, shapeless mass. The driver looked him up and down, and hesitated. Finally, in the tone of a man who is chancing it, he said:

'All right. Hop in.'

The snow had melted. Fields and forest were black as ink. The whole visible world was saturated with moisture, exuding a cold, dank vapour, and there was nobody to be seen in any of the villages along the road.

'Stop somewhere where I can change a thousand-franc note,' said Elie as they entered Charleroi.

It was nearly nine. Shops were open, but the town, like the countryside, seemed plunged in a sort of stupor, like a hibernating animal. The light was greenish-grey, a

light of undersea, and lamps were on in most of the shops

'Look here! You'd better drop me at a barber's'

The hairdresser hadn't change for a thousand-franc note, but he ran out himself to change it at a co-operative store across the way. The taxi drove off. While the hairdresser tucked a towel into his collar, Elie studied his reflected self and noticed that his eyes were bloodshot.

'You're a foreigner, eh? You must do well over the exchange with our Belgian franc so low. . . Shall I trim your hair, sir, too?'

Lorries were rumbling past the window. The hairdresser's fingers were stained with nicotine, and the smell of tobacco mingling with that of soap made Elie feel sick.

'We've lots of foreigners at Charleroi, mostly young fellows who come to learn their jobs in the coal-mines and factories. But they're all on the rocks, these days, what with the depression. A dry shampoo, sir?'

When Elie rose from the barber's chair he was feeling thoroughly sorry for himself. Instead of improving his appearance, the hairdresser's operations had made him look even more haggard than before. But probably there was something wrong with the mirror. For instance, never until now had he noticed that his nose was crooked. And his upper lip seemed much thinner than the under one.

'Is it far to the Rue du Laveu?'

'A fair step. You'd better take the Number Three. The tram-stop's just on the right as you go out.'

It was still raining, always the same misty drizzle. The tram was empty, but Elie remained on the platform. The conductor gave him the word when they reached the Rue du Laveu, and he walked up a street bordered by rows of houses all exactly alike.

In spite of the rain a woman was outside, washing a doorstep, crouching low with her back to the street, and Elie saw that the number of the house was 53

‘Excuse me. Can I speak to Madame Baron?’

‘I’m Madame Baron.’

Holding a scrubbing-brush in her right hand, she took a long look at him.

‘It’s about the room.’ He pointed to the notice fixed to the window with strips of stamp-paper.

‘Please step inside. Would you kindly wait a moment in the kitchen?’

The hall had just been washed; the red-and-yellow tiles were clean and glossy. Three overcoats and a mackintosh hung on the bamboo coat-stand. Elie knocked on the glazed door of the kitchen and a male voice called. ‘Come in.’

A young man, sitting with his feet in the oven, gazed keenly at the new-comer. At the table sat another student, in blue-striped pyjamas, his black hair plastered down with brilliantine. He was spreading a slice of bread and butter with jam.

‘Won’t you sit down?’ I suppose you’ve come about the room to let?’

Out in the hall Madame Baron was taking off her clogs and wiping her hands on her apron. Voices could be heard on the upper floor, and Elie was aware of a domestic life in which he had no part as yet.

‘Right! Now we can talk. ... But fancy coming out without an overcoat in weather like this! You must be perished!’

‘Oh, that’s because I left my luggage ...’

‘You’re not living in Charleroi?’

‘No, I’ve just come from Brussels.’

Automatically she was pouring out a cup of coffee for the visitor.

‘Antoinette!’ she shouted towards the stairs. ‘Go and see if the front room’s tidy.’

She seemed unable to keep still for a moment. While she talked she busied herself putting coal in the range, stirring the contents of a saucepan, filling a sugar-bowl.

‘Monsieur Valesco, didn’t I ask you once for all not to come downstairs in your pyjamas? A gentleman like you ought to know better. ... Move back a bit, Monsieur Moise. How do you think I can get about my work with your legs stuck in the oven?’

The door opened, Antoinette came in, and gave Elie a long stare. She was wearing a black, knitted dress – obviously home-made – that revealed the immature lines of her body, rather scraggy shoulders, the timid curve of breasts set very wide apart, unformed hips. Her stockings sagged. The small, freckled face was crowned with a mop of unruly red hair.

Her mother snapped at her:

‘Where’s your manners? Can’t you say “Good morning” to the gentleman?’

Her only response was a slight, defiant shrug. Then she deliberately sniffed Valesco’s hair, remarking:

‘I can’t stand men who soak themselves in scent, like street-girls.’

Meanwhile she was continuing to cast curious glances at Elie.

‘Would you like to see the room?’ her mother asked him. ‘It’s three hundred francs a month, coal and electric light extra. Perhaps I’d better tell you this is a quiet house, and I don’t allow my lodgers to take young ladies into their bedrooms.’

She led the way down the hall, and opened the first door on the left. There was a smell of beeswax. Against the pink-papered wall was a brass bedstead with a red quilt. Suddenly Elie went quite pale, and felt his head

going round. ... He took a quick step towards the bed.

At seven in the evening, when all the household were beginning to gather in the kitchen, he was still asleep, his mouth open, his hair plastered with sweat upon his forehead.

IV

MADAME BARON scowled when she saw Domb settling down quite coolly with his biscuit-tin at the place which she had laid so carefully

‘That’s Monsieur Elie’s place.’

Domb was a Pole, tall, fair-haired, blue-eyed, and hard-featured. He was always very spick and span, and kept up a dignified appearance, even on such occasions as the present – when he had a battered biscuit-tin under his arm. Rising with deliberate slowness, he enquired stiffly

‘May I ask where you wish me to sit?’

The kitchen was far from large, and much of the available space was taken up by a big cooking-range, enamelled white and gold. At the end of the table farthest from the range, beside the dresser, was the wicker armchair reserved for the head of the household, Monsieur Baron.

The others fitted themselves in as best they could around the table, in the order of their coming. For they didn’t wait till everybody was present, to begin the evening meal. For one thing, Baron’s mealtimes varied from day to day, according to the train in which he was on duty. His wife served him, moving to and fro between the range and his armchair, sometimes pausing to sit down for a moment and snatch a mouthful herself. Meanwhile Antoinette, her elbows planted on the table, exchanged backchat with the young men.

That was the procedure in the evening. At midday it

was different, for Madame Baron did the catering, whereas at night the lodgers were expected to fend for themselves. Each of the young men brought a tin containing bread, a slab of butter, some cheese or ham. Also, each had a private coffee-pot or teapot

Domb was scowling at the place where he had so often had his meal. It was bad enough to be evicted from it, and to make things worse he noticed that the best dinner-service, with a pink floral pattern, that was never used on ordinary occasions, had been got out. In the *hors-d'œuvre* dishes were real *hors-d'œuvre*: sardines, slices of cold sausage, and small smoked fish.

Even Baron, as he munched hunks of bread after dipping them in his coffee, kept eyeing with an odd expression this lavish outlay. Noticing which, his wife helped him to three smoked fish.

'Monsieur Elie is taking full board.' There was a hint of pride in her voice.

'He's a Jew,' muttered Domb, as he put the frying-pan on the fire.

'How can you tell? You've Jews on the brain, Monsieur Domb. Anyhow, even if he is, I can't see what difference it makes to you.'

Domb was feeling disconsolately inside his biscuit-tin.

'Well, what's it you haven't got this evening?'

'Butter.'

'All right. I'll lend you some. But it's the last time, I warn you. You're always short of something or other, and I've had enough of it. Why don't you behave like Monsieur Moise?'

He dropped a small piece of butter into the frying-pan and broke an egg over it, while Madame Baron went into the hall and shouted.

'Monsieur Moise! We're starting.'

As Domb fried his egg he cast sour glances at the

cutlets sizzling in another pan, the potatoes and brussels sprouts in saucepans — all for the new-comer

‘What’s he studying?’ he asked, as he dropped into a chair beside Antoinette

‘Nothing. He finished his studies years ago ’

Moise came in, his fuzzy hair standing up like a shaving-brush, his eyes red with poring over his books. He was a Polish Jew, and his mother, a domestic servant in Warsaw, sent him enough each month for his keep, while a charitable institution paid his tuition fees

Moise, too, stared at the unaccustomed splendour of the table, wondering where he was to sit, there was no question of taking the chair beside Domb, who never addressed him and indeed pretended to be unaware of his presence

‘Sit here, Monsieur Moise,’ said Madame Baron almost tenderly, for Moise was her special favourite ‘I’ll wager you let your fire go out again ’

She knew he did it for economy’s sake. He worked in an overcoat, sometimes with a blanket as well wrapped round his shoulders. When he came down his fingers were always stiff with cold.

‘I’ve set your tea to draw.’

He didn’t eat an egg; only bread and butter. Madame Baron, who had a habit of nosing round her lodgers’ rooms, was the only one who knew his secret — that he wore no socks

‘I wonder if he’s still asleep?’ she added, referring to Elie

‘He’s a queer bird, anyhow,’ Domb muttered. ‘Don’t like his looks ’

‘Can’t you mind your own business, instead of talking against other folks?’ Always running people down, that’s you, Monsieur Domb. As if the Poles were so much better than everybody else!’

She went out again into the hall and called as naturally as if she had been doing it for weeks.

'Monsieur Elie! Dinner's ready.'

Valesco hadn't turned up yet, but that was not surprising, sometimes he did not appear at all for the evening meal. Everyone knew he had a girl friend in Brussels, and, when flush, took her out to dinner.

'It seems that Monsieur Elie is a Jew too,' sighed Madame Baron.

'A Levantine Jew,' Moise amended. 'That's not the same thing.'

'Why not?'

'Oh, it's hard to explain; but there's a difference.'

'Of course he's very dark, and you are really rather fair ...'

There were footsteps in the hall, followed by a light tap on the kitchen door. Elie came in, and halted for a moment, blinking at the light and the already overcrowded table.

'You've met my lodgers, haven't you? Let me introduce my husband, who works on the State Railway.'

Baron rose, held out his hand punctiliously and tugged at his long grey moustache. He was collarless, and a brass-capped stud glinted in the neck-band of his shirt.

'Sit down, Monsieur Elie. You must be dreadfully hungry. You haven't had a bite since this morning.'

He sat down at the end of the table, facing Baron, taking that seat as if it fell to him by right. Domb looked away deliberately, while Antoinette seemed fascinated by the dark rings round the new-comer's eyes. Moise said to him, but without much show of interest.

'You're from Istanbul, aren't you?'

'Well, my parents are Portuguese. But I was born at Istanbul ... You're a Pole, eh?'

'I am a Pole,' Domb broke in, straightening up as if his national anthem were being played.

Valesco hurried in, bringing a waft of scent and cold air into the overheated room.

'Am I late?'

'You're always late.'

He stopped short, seeing the new lodger in the best place, with the array of *hors-d'œuvre* in front of him. After a sniff directed at the cutlets sizzling on the range, he looked enquiringly at Antoinette.

But she vouchsafed no explanation, while her mother pointed to an empty chair.

'Hurry up and start your dinner.'

The walls were enamelled white, and what with the glare and the heat Elie felt slightly dizzy. Moise's biscuit-tin touched his *hors-d'œuvre* dish, and the young men were packed so tightly round the table that they jogged each other's elbows. Domb had to move his chair alongside Madame Baron's to make room for Valesco.

The Rumanian had fished out of his pocket a package containing some small pork pies; he got more money from his people than the others, and whenever he ran short, always managed to raise a loan.

'Do you know Rumania?' he asked Elie.

'Yes, I once spent a year at Bucarest.'

'Fine city, isn't it? And Constanta! What a glorious climate! It's a bit of a change living in a hole like this, where one wallows in mud from one year's end to the other.'

'Then why do you stay here?' Madame Baron retorted.

'No offence meant. .. But ask Monsieur Nagear. Just ask him if there's any other country that can touch Rumania. And living's dirt cheap there; why, a fowl costs only a few centimes!'

The blood had come to Elie's head, and the clatter of knives and forks, the buzz of voices, confused him. It was impossible for him to move an inch without touching Moise on his left or Valesco on his right. His mind seemed to have gone blank, and he gazed with unseeing eyes at the people round the table, the biscuit-tins, the cups of coffee, as he went on eating, almost unconsciously, his meat and vegetables. Suddenly he heard Madame Baron's voice directed towards him.

'What do you drink with your meals?' she asked.

'In my country we always have *rakı*. I don't expect you know it . . . I'll have water, please.'

He had no appetite. His nose felt hot and swollen and there was a throbbing in his temples as if he were immersed in an over-hot bath. Baron, who had finished his meal, pushed back his chair and opened an evening paper.

Each of these people lived for himself or herself, the Barons no less than those birds of passage, their lodgers. While old Baron puffed at a big meerschaum pipe, and read his paper, Antoinette began washing up on a corner of the range.

Elie wasn't thinking of Van der Boomp, or even of Sylvie — though it was in this house she had spent her childhood. All sorts of vague ideas were drifting through his mind. That he was older than the other lodgers; that, as he was paying for full board, he'd be treated with special consideration. This last thought gave him pleasure.

'Do you like cheese to finish off with?'

'Yes, but I don't feel hungry tonight.'

He had given his landlady a thousand francs, one of the notes from the wad, though the monthly rate was only eight hundred francs.

'You can carry forward the difference,' he had said.

He had glimpses of the newspaper, the *Gazette de Charleroi*, a local daily printed on spongy paper in exceedingly large type

As usual, Madame Baron was on her feet most of the time, occasionally stopping to eat a few mouthfuls. It was she who waited on Elie.

‘Won’t you finish your cutlets?’

‘Sorry, but this awful cold I have seems to have killed my appetite.’

Baron looked up from his paper

‘An influenza epidemic is raging all over Europe,’ he announced. ‘I see that the death-rate in London went up thirty per cent last week.’

He had a slow, oracular way of speaking. Each time he puffed out the pipe-smoke his long moustache streamed forward from his lips

‘Have they caught the murderer yet?’ Antoinette asked

Though he knew this referred to him, Elie didn’t turn a hair, and looked up with no more show of interest than the others

‘No, not yet. But the police are on his tracks, it seems, and an early arrest may be expected. They’ve made enquiries at Van der Cruyssen’s bank and got the numbers of the banknotes.’

Baron looked round the room, and a change came over his appearance; he became the vigilant employee of the Belgian State Railways, whose duty it was to go from carriage to carriage checking tickets.

‘And to think there’s some folks say there aren’t any risks in our job!’ he exclaimed. ‘Why, that fellow might easily have killed the guard as well!’

He seemed put out by the faint smile, quickly repressed, that rose to Elie’s lips.

‘Aye, it’s a dangerous job, whatever you may think.

And in spite of that they've put back our retiring age to sixty, just like the fellows who work in the office. It ain't fair'

Elie's smile had been no more than a nervous reflex. While Baron was speaking, he had been observing Madame Baron, and had noticed a slight change in her expression, as if a vague suspicion – less than that, an unformulated thought – had crossed her mind. And he had guessed its cause: that reference to the banknotes. The thousand-franc note he had given her must still be in the house.

'Some coffee?'

He had employed only two notes so far; one that the barber had changed at the co-operative store, and the other given to Madame Baron, which, after folding it several times, she had slipped into her purse

'No, thanks. I never take coffee at night.'

'Do you know how many marks of blows were found on the corpse? Eighteen!'

He was as amazed as the others.

'Yes, eighteen blows with a spanner. They think the murderer must be a garage-hand or something of that sort; anyhow, someone who's used to handling tools. The police officer who checked the passports doesn't remember the nationality of the man in the carriage with the Dutchman, as there were a number of foreigners on the train. But he believes the man was an Italian, or a Greek.'

Madame Baron was taking from the oven the custard she had made for Elie. The others had finished their meal. Domb, who had been particularly taciturn all the evening, banged the lid upon his tin, rose and stalked out, after making a gesture like a military salute.

'He's furious,' Valesco remarked to Elie.

'Why?'

'Because you're a new-comer, and you're better off than he. Also because you're a Jew, and he loathes Jews.'

'He should have more sense,' Madame Baron observed severely; she was washing the plates her daughter handed her. 'What's the point of loathing people if they don't do you no harm? Before the war I had a Russian and a Pole here. Well, those two young men stayed two years under this roof without even saying "Good morning" to each other. I never heard such nonsense! ... Antoinette, give Monsieur Elie an ash-tray.'

Baron went on reading. His pipe was sizzling. Elie felt a warm, agreeable languor coming over him as, resting his elbows on the table, he smoked a cigarette. He could feel the blood coursing through his veins, a tingling in his nose and throat, and the tobacco had a queer, spicy flavour.

There was a clatter of crockery from the small zinc basin in which the two women were washing up. Moise was staring at the table-cloth, while Valesco smoked a Turkish cigarette that Elie had given him.

'We dine much later at Istanbul.'

'Oh? What time?'

'Nine or ten.'

'What do you have to eat?' asked Madame Baron.

'We start off with all sorts of tasty little oddments that we call mazet. After that comes lamb and vegetables – perhaps half a dozen kinds of vegetables – and fruit to finish up with.'

'Are they good cooks in your part of the world?'

'First rate!'

He recalled that last evening at Abdullah's with his friends; the sideboard heaped with succulent fare of all descriptions.

'Farced vine-leaves, for instance,' he murmured.

'Well, I never! I'm not so sure I'd like that Farced vine-leaves — they *must* taste funny!'

At Abdullah's he had had an almost royal send-off, and everyone had said to him when he announced that he was leaving · 'Lucky devil!'

'What language do you speak at home?'

'French.'

'Haven't you another language?'

'Yes, there's Turkish, of course. But all the better-class people talk French amongst themselves.'

'Fancy that!'

Antoinette was observing him from the corner of an eye. One had an impression she was trying to size him up but couldn't manage it — and this vexed her

'At Pera everybody's about till late at night.' There was an undertone of regret in Elie's voice. 'One meets one's friends and roams about the streets, dropping into little cafés, where they have Turkish orchestras and singers. You can't imagine how mild and pleasant the night air is in Turkey. Nobody dreams of going to bed before midnight.'

'Just like Rumania,' Valesco put in approvingly. 'You'll see as many people in the streets at midnight as at six in the evening.'

'That's all very fine,' said Madame Baron, 'but what about going to work next morning?'

Elie blew his nose again, and she remarked compassionately:

'Why, your handkerchief's wet through! I'll lend you one to keep you going till your things come ... Antoinette, go and get one of your dad's hankies, the ones in the left-hand drawer.'

Elie was thinking of the two banknotes, the one at the co-operative store, and the other in his landlady's purse. He wasn't really anxious. Still, he proposed, as soon as

Baron had done with his paper, to ask him for the loan of it and, if the numbers of the stolen notes were there, to burn it in his bedroom fire. As for the co-operative, they weren't likely to check the numbers on the hundreds of notes they must receive each day

'Do you come from Vilna itself?' he asked Moise.

'Yes, I've always lived there'

'I've been there twice, both times in the winter. It seemed pretty grim'

'Ah, but you should see it in the summer.'

'What subject are you studying?'

'Chemistry. I've finished the course. But I'm staying on an extra year to study glass-making'

Moise addressed him in a tone in which deference mingled with rancour, the tone a ghetto-born Polish Jew employs when speaking to an emancipated Jew from Southern Europe.

'In the Stop-Press news,' Baron announced, after taking a pull at his pipe, 'they say the murderer seems to have had an accomplice — a man or a woman, they aren't sure which. Madame Van der Cruysen is now in Paris and is making arrangements to have the body moved there.'

'Oh, he was married?'

For a moment Elie gasped. He'd never thought of that! Then he started trying to picture what the Dutchman's wife might look like.

'There's her photo.'

It was badly reproduced, all in smudgy greys, but one could distinctly see a very tall, stately-looking lady trying to elude the pressman's lens.

'She looks much younger than he,' Elie remarked

The photograph gave the impression of a woman in the middle thirties. She had not had time to procure full mourning. Antoinette came back.

‘Here’s a handkerchief ’

Elie took the opportunity of blowing his nose lengthily; when he put the handkerchief in his pocket his face was scarlet. Noticing which, Madame Baron waxed motherly again.

‘Listen! I’ll make you a nice hot grog, and you’d better take two aspirins before going to bed ’

‘Thanks very much. Sorry to give you all this trouble . ’

‘Oh, I’m used to it. You young fellows never know how to look after yourselves ’

It was amusing to be treated as a ‘young fellow’ like the others, when he was thirty-five! Thirty-five – that must be about Madame Van de Cruyssen’s age ..

Moise got up, muttering a vague ‘Good night,’ and went off to his room. Madame Baron listened to the receding footsteps, then quietly closed the door.

‘He’s another,’ she sighed. ‘Just now I told him to finish off the cutlet you didn’t eat. But he was too proud. And all the poor boy has to eat is an egg a day, and some bread and butter ’

‘Why couldn’t he have stayed in his country,’ Valesco said rather peevishly, ‘instead of coming here to study?’

‘What about *you*?’

‘That’s quite different. My people can afford to see I have enough ’

‘One wouldn’t think so – not at the end of the month, anyhow. You’re always just as short of cash as he, the last ten days.’

She went on washing up as she talked, saying the first thing that came into her head, with a sort of rough good-humour. Meanwhile Baron had started a new page of his newspaper. Antoinette, who was putting back the cups and plates in a cupboard behind her father, gave a push to his armchair.

‘Want me to move?’ he grunted.

‘Don’t bother I’ve almost done’

Madame Baron tipped the dirty water out into the sink, and wrung out the dishcloth with a brisk turn of her wrists. Valesco rose, stretched himself and yawned.

‘Surely you’re not going out at this hour?’ Madame Baron exclaimed.

‘Got to, I’m afraid’

‘Now look here, if you make any noise coming in, or forget the key again, I warn you straight, you shan’t stay here another hour I’ve no use for men who’re always running after .. after women who’re no better than they should be.’

Valesco winked at Elie, who was lighting another cigarette. Now that the room was quieter, the ticking of the alarm-clock standing on the mantelpiece between two brass candlesticks could be heard now and again.

‘Good night, Antoinette Good night, everyone’

And Valesco retired to his room to powder his face, brush his hair and spray some more scent on it before going out.

‘They’re only youngsters,’ Madame Baron confided to Elie, ‘and if I didn’t scold them now and then, there’d be no peace in the house. Of course I saw at once you were different, a quiet sort of fellow. Still, I can’t understand a sensible man like you getting mixed up in politics It don’t seem natural.’

For, when asking her not to report his presence to the police, he had told her he’d been banished from his country because of his political activities

‘Who’s the big man in Turkey? A king? A president?’

‘Neither. A dictator.’

He smiled He was aching in every limb but, strangely enough, the sensation was more agreeable than otherwise – almost voluptuous. The warmth and intimacy of

this humble little kitchen were acting like an anodyne on his jaded nerves.

Now and again he caught Antoinette gazing at him in a curiously rapt manner, and this added to his satisfaction, there was no doubt he'd made a strong impression on her. Not altogether a favourable impression, judging by what he saw in her eyes. It was more like a vague mistrust; as if she, unlike the others, was intelligent enough to realize he had no business in such a house as this. But it proved one thing, anyhow, that she was definitely interested in him — perhaps afraid of becoming too much interested.

He couldn't bring himself to move. The table had been cleared and spread with a blue-and-white check oilcloth. Seated beside the range, Madame Baron was peeling potatoes for the next day's meals, while Antoinette darned socks, Domb's or Valesco's probably

'I can't abide people who turn up their noses at everybody else, as if they were the lords of creation,' Madame Baron remarked 'Most of the Poles I have here are like that.' She turned to her husband. 'Germain, why don't you offer Monsieur Elie a little drink?'

He jumped up hastily and took a bottle of sloe-gin from the cupboard.

'Tell me what you think of it. It comes from Luxembourg, I'm on duty on the train there once a week.'

The liqueur gave off a heady fragrance. The smell of pipe-smoke mingled in the air with the subtler smell of Turkish cigarettes. Now and again they heard Moise's footsteps in the room above.

'He sometimes works thirteen or fourteen hours in the day. He has a letter from his mother once a week, and, would you believe it, she has to get a neighbour to write it for her! Fancy there being folk in these days who don't know how to write!'

'Oh, it's you, Sylvie. You gave me quite a turn. Why didn't you say "Good morning"?' By force of habit Madame Baron proffered her cheek to be kissed, and Sylvie brushed it with her lips. A bottle of rum, with an empty glass beside it, stood on the bedside table.

'Going to stay here for a bit, or is it one of your flying visits?'

There was always a vaguely suspicious look in Madame Baron's eyes when she observed her daughter, and now nothing escaped her; neither the fact that she had a new handbag and a new, rather austere cut tailor-made costume, nor that her eyes had dark rings round them, and she seemed anxious about something.

'I'll go and have a cup of coffee in the kitchen,' Sylvie said abruptly.

She felt sure this was Elie's bedroom, but dared not ask her mother. The kitchen, when she entered it, was full of steam, and a man was sitting in front of the range. The air was so thick that she almost collided with him.

'Can't you see the soup's boiling over?' she exclaimed, and shifted the saucepan to the edge of the range.

The circle of glowing coal came into view, and Sylvie began hunting for the lid of the saucepan. When she turned, she saw Moise on his feet, bowing to her. He was holding some cyclostyled sheets, evidently a course that he had been studying.

Elie, who was at the table eating eggs and bacon, rose slightly from his seat.

'Carry on with your breakfast. Don't mind me!'

The window was coated with vapour, even the walls were wet, and the atmosphere was so stifling that Sylvie went to the door and opened it a few inches, meanwhile casting furtive glances at Elie.

He had only just got up, and all he had done to make

himself presentable was to run a comb through his hair. Like Baron on his return from work, he was in his shirt-sleeves

He went on eating, taking no notice of Sylvie, and Moise settled down again to his studies. One had the impression of a family scene that had been momentarily interrupted — so rooted did the two men seem in their surroundings.

Seating herself in the wicker armchair, Sylvie asked :

‘Got a cold?’

‘Yes, I’ve a beastly cold And a stiff neck, too.’

She gazed at him intently. A silence followed, so tense with unspoken thoughts that the student looked up uneasily from his papers and stared first at Sylvie, then at Nagear. Sylvie was the first to speak.

‘Are you comfortable here?’

‘Very comfortable indeed. Everyone’s most kind.’

And now Sylvie’s lips tightened; she made no effort to conceal her ill-humour. She was raging, perhaps against Elie, perhaps against the tiresome young student who persisted in staying where he wasn’t wanted.

‘I wonder Mother stands it, having the lodgers cluttering up the kitchen all the time ’

Quietly Moise rose, went to the door, and vanished up the hall. Sylvie decided not to waste a moment. Bending forward, she said in a low tone

‘They’ve found out the numbers of the notes.’

‘I know that.’

There was a flash of anger in her eyes.

‘You know that — and you can sit here calmly, eating your breakfast!’

That was so; he felt quite calm. He hadn’t realized it at first, but, now that she pointed it out, he was amazed at his tranquillity. He had sweated copiously all night and his cold was much better. Only his stiff neck was still

giving trouble, he had to be careful how he moved his head.

'Did you pay my mother in advance?'

'Of course'

She shot a keen glance at him, then rose and opened the soup-tureen on the dresser. It was never used for soup, and served as a receptacle for odds and ends. In it now were some old letters, a tax receipt, a little silver bell with a blue tassel. There were also Madame Baron's purse, and in it Sylvie found the thousand-franc note.

'Well, what are you going to do about it?'

From now on it was clear that they no longer understood each other. Indeed there were moments when Elie seemed to have no idea to what she was referring. After a pause he answered gloomily :

'Surely it's obvious there's nothing to be done.'

She replaced the lid on the soup-tureen.

'Anyhow, you've got to put another note instead of that one in Mother's purse . Do you hear?'

She was talking much too loud; losing her head, in fact. Elie put a warning finger to his lips and, to keep himself in countenance, fell to poking the fire, as he'd seen Moise doing earlier in the morning

'I've brought your luggage. It's at the Station Café.'

Elie poured himself out another cup of coffee; then looked at Sylvie, as if to ask, 'Would you like some too?'

Just then she noticed the brown felt slippers he was wearing - her father's slippers.

'Listen! You can't stay here. One of the railway staff has told the police he saw you coming back to Belgium. They're hunting for you in Brussels.'

'Are you still at the *Palace*?'

'Don't be a damned fool!' she snapped.

She went to the door and, opening it, saw her mother washing the tiles in the hall

'What! Saturday already!' she exclaimed; then closed the door, and said to Elie. 'If you must know, I'm sharing a room with another girl, one of the *Merryland* crowd. And I've told her everything. She's a pal of mine.'

He was standing in front of the range, toasting his back, his eyes fixed on the window and the dreary little back-yard.

'I dare say you think you're mighty clever, Elie – but I tell you straight. you've got to clear out of here.'

He bent his head, like a scolded schoolboy, and said weakly :

'How can I? I haven't any money.'

'That's your lookout. . . Wait! Here's three hundred francs; that will see you across the Dutch frontier'

His apathy was getting on her nerves.

'Didn't you hear what I said? For God's sake try to wake up!'

'Ssh! Your mother's coming.'

That was so Madame Baron entered, wiping her hands, and again, when she looked at her daughter, a vague suspicion flickered in her eyes

'Your room's ready, Monsieur Elie. Antoinette will be back in a few minutes, and she'll light your fire. I shall be needing the kitchen soon, I have to wash the floor and scour the saucepans'

She moved the pots on the range, put some coal on the fire, and bustled out.

No sooner had she gone than Sylvie rounded on him.

'The truth is, you haven't the guts to make a move. You'd rather stick here like a limpet'

'Three hundred francs wouldn't see me far. And, anyhow, I don't see what harm I do by staying here.'

He made a wry face; without thinking, he had just turned his head too quickly. Never before had Sylvie seen him in this state, his clothes bedraggled, his collar-

stud jogging on his Adam's apple, his feet in shabby slippers much too large for him. What was more, he seemed to take a certain pleasure in flaunting his abasement.

'Anyhow, you've burnt the other notes, haven't you?'

'Not yet. How about you?'

'I've burnt mine.'

He knew that she was lying.

'Hullo, there's Antoinette coming back!'

For already he could recognize her footsteps. She rattled the letter-box, and her mother opened. A minute later she came into the kitchen, and stopped short on seeing her sister there.

'Oh, you're here. ...'

She had been to the butcher's. After slamming some meat down on the table she held up her cheek towards Sylvie to be kissed, as her mother had done; then went to the fire and warmed her hands. No one spoke for some minutes. Then Antoinette gave her sister a frankly disapproving glance, and said sulkily:

'Hope I'm not intruding?'

'What's come over you?'

'And look here, when you give me stockings, you might at least bring silk ones! ... Monsieur Elie, the best thing you can do is to go straight to bed.'

She was obviously determined to remain in the kitchen — if only to spite her sister.

'Will you be here for lunch, Sylvie?'

'Don't think so.'

'Then why ever did you come? ... Monsieur Elie, if you *must* stay in the kitchen, you might at least sit down. It makes me quite giddy seeing you standing up, with your head cocked on one side.'

'I see your manners haven't improved,' Sylvie remarked.

'Why should they? I ain't a grand lady, I don't wear silk stockings.'

A long silence followed. The soup began to simmer again, filling the air with steam.

'Look here, I must know if you're staying to lunch, because if you are I'll go out and buy a beefsteak.'

'Don't bother.'

Antoinette's gaze fell on the soup-tureen on the dresser. After a quick glance at her sister she walked up to it. She had noticed that the lid had been replaced carelessly, at a slant. Lifting it, she fumbled inside, opened the purse, and seemed reassured.

'What are you up to?' Sylvie asked.

'Oh, nothing. But I might ask *you* that, mightn't I? It's funny you should come all the way from Brussels just to spend a few minutes in a kitchen that stinks of cabbage soup.'

Sylvie merely shrugged her shoulders, and said to Elie: 'Give me a cig.'

Antoinette kept her eyes fixed on her.

'You'd rather I left you to yourselves, wouldn't you? ... All right, I'll go.'

The moment her sister had left, Sylvie bent towards him, asking:

'Have you told her anything?'

'Not likely!'

'Anyhow, get this into your head, Elie: *you've got to go!* .. You understand?'

Just then the door opened, and she drew back hastily. Very spick and span as usual, Domb clicked his heels together and, stooping, kissed the hand she extended to him.

'I must apologize for entering so abruptly. I'd no idea that I should find myself in the presence of a charming lady!' He was a very susceptible young man, and

addicted to high-flown phrases. Turning to Elie, he added: 'May I hope you're feeling better after a good night's rest?'

Without seeming to notice the far from cordial expression on their faces, he held his white, well-kept hands towards the fire, then rubbed them together

'If I'm not mistaken, this is the second time I've had the pleasure of seeing you, Mademoiselle, and as I said yesterday to your mother ..'

'That reminds me, I've something to tell her,' Sylvie interrupted, and hurried out of the kitchen.

'What on earth's come over her?' Domb looked quite startled 'Did I say something I shouldn't have?'

Elie gazed at him vaguely, as if he had not heard, and watched the smoke of his cigarette curling up through the hot, stagnant air.

Madame Baron was raising her voice in the hall.

'All right, my fine lady, go if you want to, as your home ain't grand enough for you. Sorry we can't offer you chicken and champagne for lunch. ...'

Sylvie's high heels clicked on the tiled floor. She came back to the kitchen for her bag and snatched it off the table

'Off already? What a pity!' Domb got into position to kiss her hand again.

She took no notice of him, and after a venomous glance at Elie marched out of the kitchen. A moment later the street door banged.

'What a charming, charming girl!' the Pole exclaimed enthusiastically 'I wonder if you realize how ...'

But, without waiting for him to finish, Elie too went out of the room. Antoinette was kneeling in front of the little old-fashioned stove, waiting for the wood to catch before putting on the coal.

The window overlooked the street. The pavements

were almost dry, but the roadway was still deep in grimy slush, coated here and there with ice.

Sylvie wasn't to be seen at the tram-stop outside the grocery, and Elie pictured her stalking ragefully towards the centre of the town. On his left he heard a sound of shrill voices, running feet, and a band of school-children came scampering by. It was half past eleven and they had just left the schoolhouse at the end of the street.

'By the way,' he said to Antoinette, 'there's something I'd like to ask you to do.'

He waited for some moments, expecting her to look round, but she remained kneeling in front of the stove, without moving. Then, when he least expected it, he heard her ask impatiently:

'Well? What is it?'

'I don't feel up to going out yet. I wonder if you'd be kind enough to go and fetch my luggage?'

'Oh! So you really have some luggage?'

He felt so uncomfortable that he turned his head and looked out of the window again.

'I left it at the Station Café,' he said, 'as I wasn't sure if I could find a room.'

'Why didn't you get Sylvie to bring it? Considering you sleep with her. .. Oh, it's no use putting on that innocent air, as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouth. Mother's easy game, I know – but you can't fool *me*!' She stopped talking, as the coal was rattling off the shovel into the stove.

When she had done with the fire she looked round and saw Elie still gazing out of the window.

'Why did my sister come today? ... No, you needn't tell me; I can guess. She was in a state because they've got the numbers of the banknotes. It was that, wasn't it? You may as well own up.'

Elie went to the door to make sure no one was

listening outside. The bed had been made, the room was tidy, and waves of heat were flooding it from the stove, which was roaring cheerfully, red cinders clattering down into the tin tray below.

'Oh, you needn't look so worried, I shan't give you away. Do you know, I guessed at once why you and Sylvie were glaring at each other when I came into the kitchen. Sylvie'd been telling you to leave this house. That's right, isn't it?'

At that he had to turn and face the girl. Her eyes were fixed on him, and in them he could see faint glints of red, like the red of her unruly hair.

'I know my sister much better than you do. You needn't worry about that note in Mother's purse; I'll manage to change it before Monday. First thing this morning I burnt the paper which had the numbers on it.'

So that was why he hadn't been able to find it! When for a few minutes he had had the kitchen to himself he'd hunted for it high and low, for he felt fairly sure the newspapers wouldn't publish the numbers of the stolen notes a second time.

'Is your luggage heavy?'

'There are two suitcases and a small bag. You'll need a taxi.'

'Just fancy a man like you letting my sister lead him by the nose!'

He vainly tried not to blush.

'All right, I'll go and get your things. Then you'll be able to get into some clean clothes – and high time too! You look a sight and a fright got up like that!'

He heard her talking to her mother on the landing, then going up another flight of steps. Elie had worked out the number of rooms. Besides his bedroom and the kitchen the only other room on the ground floor was the

dining-room, redolent of beeswax, in which no one ever set foot. On the floor above were only two rooms – that of Valesco, immediately overhead, and Domb's at the back, overlooking the yard.

Strictly speaking, there was no second floor. Moïse Kaler had an attic-room with a dormer window. The Barons occupied another attic-room, while their young daughter was relegated to a sort of loft, lighted by a small skylight in the roof.

She went up to it now, to dress. When she came down she walked through the hall without stopping. Elie saw her going down the street, a thin childish figure wrapped in a shoddy, ill-fitting green coat.

He noticed that she had a way of drawing her hat absurdly low over her eyes and swaying her meagre hips; indeed, anyone who didn't know her might easily have taken her for a juvenile street-walker on the prowl. Her shoes were down at heel, her stockings creased. She had been lavish with her lipstick, and her mouth showed as a red gash in the heavily powdered face.

A knock at the door. Madame Baron entered.

'I've come to see if the fire has caught.'

She could never stay quiet for five minutes on end. The stove was so hot that she had to wrap her hand in her apron before opening the fire-door.

'I'm sure you can't get coal as good as this in your country. I have it direct from the colliery, so it only costs you one franc fifty the scuttle. And Monsieur Domb, who feels the cold terribly, makes a scuttle last two full days, even when it's freezing outside.'

She gave a glance round the room to see that all was in order.

'What do you think of my daughter – my eldest, I mean? You mustn't judge her by her looks; she's quite a good girl at heart. Only she's always been crazy on

dancing. Still, I own I wouldn't care to see her here too often. ... Have you any sisters?'

Elie had to think. He'd almost forgotten if he had any sisters. The question jerked him back into another life, that now seemed infinitely remote. After some moments he said:

'Yes, I have a sister.'

'Is she nice-looking? Does she live in Turkey?'

Yes, she lived at Pera. Presumably she was pretty, as all his male friends had shown an interest in her. All the same, though she was twenty-seven, she had never been engaged. For the first time Elie caught himself wondering if she'd ever had a serious love-affair.

With an effort he conjured up a picture of the modernistic flat in a big block of houses where Esther and her mother lived. But he found it impossible to visualize the details, and it suddenly struck him that he had never troubled to observe them, and, what surprised him still more, that his sister was a stranger to him.

'Have you any photos in your luggage?'

'No, I don't think I have.'

'I'm sorry about that. All my lodgers have pictures of their families hanging in their rooms. So I get to know what their mothers and brothers and sisters look like. Sometimes one of them has his mother come to see him, and she writes to me regular after she's gone back home, and I like that. Last year Monsieur Domb's mother paid him a visit — such a nice lady she is. You'd never think he was her son. He's going bald — you must have noticed that. His mother's such a pretty woman, and quite young. When they're out together you'd take 'em for a pair of lovebirds. It was this room she slept in.'

Though she never ceased talking, Madame Baron was always busy doing something, flicking off dust, putting each object in its place. Twice she stepped back to make

sure the brass flower-pot container, standing on a small lace mat, was plumb in the middle of the window ledge.

'I've been meaning to tell you. Don't let my husband know I didn't make you fill in the form reporting your arrival to the police. You see, he's in government service himself, and he don't see things like we do.'

Now and again a red-and-yellow tram clanged past the window. A string of a dozen tip-carts, laden with coal, went slowly by, the big iron tyres grinding on the cobbles, the cartmen walking in front of their horses, whips resting on their shoulders.

*

Sylvie had to wait till one o'clock for the next train back to Brussels. Sitting in the railway waiting-room, she had a glimpse of her sister entering the Station Café and coming out with Elie's suitcases

At Brussels, too, it was raining, but the effect was less depressing, what with the shops all lighted up and bursts of music coming from the big cafés.

At eight o'clock Sylvie, already in evening-dress, was sitting by herself near the band-platform in a *brasserie*, having a meal of cold meat and beer. The pianist, a thin young man, kept smiling to her, and, without thinking, she returned his smile.

It was as restful as a warm bath — this huge room hazy with smoke, full of the fumes of coffee and beer, where the clink of plates and glasses blended with the languorous strains of a Viennese waltz. At a table facing her was a pale, shy-looking youngster, who, cold as was the weather, had only a light mackintosh over his suit. Sylvie observed that he was wearing a flowing bow-tie and there was a wide-brimmed hat of the 'Latin Quarter' type on the chair beside him, which made her smile.

An artist obviously; a painter, or a poet. He couldn't be more than twenty. He was doggedly smoking a small stumpy pipe and, unlike the pianist, gazing at Sylvie with romantically wistful eyes.

The pianist noticed him as the band was striking up again after a pause, and favoured Sylvie with a humorous, comprehending wink.

The time passed slowly. The *Merryland* did not open till ten. The entertainment manager, who was an acquaintance of Sylvie's, had taken her on as one of his show-girls, promising her a solo-dance turn the following week.

There was a constant stir of people coming and going. Games of cards and backgammon were in progress on the marble-topped tables. The layer of smoke between the players' heads and the gilt-scrolled ceiling was steadily growing denser.

At a quarter to ten Sylvie went out, after bestowing a final smile on the musician. Just before opening the door she chanced to look round and saw that the young man with the Latin Quarter hat was following her.

It was raining less heavily. The *Merryland* was only five hundred yards up the street, so she decided to go on foot.

'Wonder if he'll speak to me?'

She quickened her pace, slowed down, then hurried on again. When she reached the entrance of the cabaret the young man hadn't yet accosted her.

'Has Jacqueline come?' she asked the commissionaire.

'I haven't seen her going in.'

She went up to the first floor, left her furs in the cloak-room, and spent some minutes in the Ladies, redressing her make-up. As she walked towards the bar, she saw the young man, perched on a high stool, smoking his pipe and staring with affected ease at the empty room.

Just then Jacqueline came in. She was a plump, good-humoured-looking young woman in a low-cut green silk frock with a vast pink rose in velvet on one shoulder.

'What luck?' asked Sylvie.

The barman, busy with his bottles and glasses, paid no attention to the two girls.

'I've done Ghent and Antwerp, and managed to change twenty notes. The money's in my bag. ... What news your end? Have you seen him? How did he strike you?'

'He's a queer bird and no mistake. He's that calm you wouldn't think he'd done it.'

'Will he be coming to Brussels?'

'I shouldn't think so. He seems to have dug himself in there; he just sits in front of the fire, and eats his meals, and ...'

She stopped speaking. She had noticed the young man gazing hard at her over Jacqueline's shoulder. On the point of making a face at him, for some reason she changed her mind and smiled.

'Barman, the same again,' he said.

You could see he wasn't used to it. He'd read that phrase in a novel, most likely. And, though he tried to prevent himself from doing so, when ordering the drink he eyed the price-list on the bar with obvious apprehension.

'What are you going to do, Sylvie?'

'Ask me another! It's no use making plans till we see how things are going to pan out. Anyhow, tomorrow you'd better go and change the other notes at Liège and Namur.'

'Do you think it's safe? To tell the truth, I'm beginning to get the wind up. ...'

But Jacqueline was amenable; finally she agreed to do whatever Sylvie wanted. A bell tinkled, the first customers of the night were arriving. The two girls gave

hasty glances at their faces in the mirror at the back of the bar, then swung themselves on to stools. The young man's eyes still hung on Sylvie, wistfully imploring.

VI

It was the third night. The meal had just ended and the young men were talking at the top of their voices, when Elie, who had watched Domb lighting a cigarette, took advantage of a lull to remark :

'I dare say you think that tobacco you're smoking comes from Egypt?'

'Of course it does. I suppose you're going to tell us that it comes from Turkey.' Domb had no use for chauvinism — in others.

'That's just where it does come from. For one thing, there's a law forbidding tobacco-growing in Egypt. I've lived there, so I ought to know, and what's more, my father was one of the leading exporters of oriental tobaccos.'

Domb held his peace, and stared sulkily at his plate. It was the third meal during which most of the conversation had turned on Turkey, and he preferred not to give Elie another opportunity of showing off.

But Madame Baron, who had an enquiring mind, asked from the end of the table :

'Didn't you take over your father's business?'

'At the time when I might have done so I was all out for a good time. Travelling about the world. I used to spend the summer in the mountains, in the Tyrol or the Caucasus, and winter in the Crimea or on the Riviera.'

'You're an only child, aren't you?'

'No, I've a sister.'

'Silly of me to ask! I remember now; you told me you'd a sister. Is your father dead?'

'He lost nearly all his money speculating, and I rather think that killed him. When he died, my mother and sister had just enough to live on.'

Moise was gazing dreamily at the table-cloth, unaware to all appearance that anyone was talking. Now and again Valesco shot a quick, searching glance at Elie. It was Madame Baron, above all, who seemed to drink in his words, while Antoinette, like Domb, feigned complete indifference.

Baron had already pushed back his armchair and started reading the paper. A sharp frost had set in and children had made slides along the gutters; the night was clear, the sky bathed in a pale, wintry sheen.

'You ought to go out for a bit, Monsieur Elie,' Madame Baron had kept on telling him. 'If you wrap yourself up well, you won't come to any harm. You'll never get right if you stay indoors all the time.'

But, though he was blowing his nose less often and was conscious of his stiff neck only now and then – when, for instance, he had been crouching over the fire for an hour or two and suddenly stood up – he hated the idea of going out. He found a curious sensation of well-being within the four walls of this little house, and, though he did absolutely nothing all day, never felt bored. Even the effort of getting fully dressed was too much for him, and he pottered about the house in slippers, collarless, like Baron, the brass cap of his collar-stud jogging his Adam's apple.

'So you haven't a photo of your sister with you?'

'No. But I wish I'd brought my photos; I'd have shown you one of our villa at Prinkipo.'

'Prinkipo? Where's that?'

'It's an island in the Sea of Marmora, an hour's run from Istanbul. In early spring everybody who can manage it clears out of town and goes to Prinkipo, where

the climate's simply marvellous. Everyone has his private caique.'

'What's that?'

'A light row-boat, with a sail as well. In the evenings you see dozens of them gliding about on a sea that's calm as a lake. Usually there are musicians on board, and the air is full of music, and the most wonderful scents. The islands are a mass of flowers, and in the distance you see the white minarets tapering up along the coast.'

All this was true, and he visualized the scene so clearly that he could have made an accurate sketch of it. And yet somehow he didn't *feel* it. He could hardly convince himself that he had spent a good part of his life there.

That was why he talked about it; and also because he saw Madame Baron drinking it all in. When Antoinette began to show signs of restiveness, her mother rounded on her.

'Can't you keep still when Monsieur Elie's speaking?'

For his descriptions of the Near East had much the same effect on her as the voices of crooners on the wireless; they plunged her into a world where all was glamour.

'Tell me, Monsieur Elie, what sort of clothes do you wear in Turkey?'

'Oh, the same as here. But, before Kemal's rise to power, most people wore the oriental costume.'

'Did you?'

'No. I'm not a Mohammedan. And, anyhow, the better-class people at Pera always dressed just as they do in Paris – except that one sometimes wore a fez.'

Domb, who was looking more and more bored, stood up, and after a curt bow to the company retired to his room. Madame Baron was so absorbed that she forgot to start washing up, and even Baron now and again looked up from his paper to listen to Elie.

'Of course, life at Pera isn't what it used to be — on account of the depression. But some years ago it was perhaps even more — what shall I call it? — more *brilliant* than at Paris. You could hear every language in the streets, and everyone had pots of money.'

That, too, was quite true, yet he had a feeling he was lying. He delved in his memory for something else to tell, something to increase the effect he was already conscious of producing.

'When we went to the seaside, on the Asia Minor coast ..' he began.

He leant back in his chair, as he had seen the other lodgers do when the meal was over. When he had finished his description, Madame Baron asked :

'Do your mother and sister know you're in Belgium?'

'No. I haven't written to them yet.'

At last Madame Baron had begun washing up, after handing Antoinette a kitchen-cloth.

'In my country,' Valesco said, 'Constanta on the Black Sea is the great resort. It's quite as smart as any of the Riviera towns.'

But it fell flat Nobody wanted to hear about Rumania.

'Yes, Constanta's not too bad. But it can't touch the places on the Bosphorus!'

Moise, who could have told them only of the Vilna ghetto, went quietly out.

'Why not go to the theatre, Monsieur Elie? There's a company from Brussels there tonight. The Number Three tram drops you just at the entrance.'

'Thanks for letting me know — but I'd rather stay here.'

'What! Don't you like going to the theatre?'

'Oh, I'm sick of theatres; been to too many of them, I suppose. One went to a show almost every night, in my country, and was out till three or four in the morning.'

There was a homely sound of splashes and the chink of crockery from the basin in which Madame Baron was washing up. Elie was gazing straight in front of him as he puffed at his cigarette, his mind in a pleasant haze, due partly to his cold and partly to the stuffiness of the atmosphere. They seemed to blend so well that he felt no wish to recover, and whenever his fever showed signs of passing off he took a gulp of hot grog to make himself start sweating again.

‘Do you intend to stay long in Belgium? I’m sure you must find it dreadfully dull after all the wonderful places you’ve visited.’

What most of all had impressed the good lady was the contents of his suitcases: silk shirts and pyjamas embroidered with his initials, a whole repertory of ties, a well-cut tail-coat, not to mention a silver toilet-set.

Pointing to the tail-coat, she had asked:

‘Do you wear that often?’

‘Whenever I go out at night.’

Even he himself had gazed at his evening-dress with a certain wonder. Could it be true that only a fortnight ago he was still on board the *Théophile-Gautier*, one of the little group of Sylvie’s admirers, who after dinner always went with her to the smoking-room, taking turns to stand champagne all round?

Here there were certain words that acted like a spell, and ‘champagne’ was one of them. He had only to mention it for Madame Baron to conjure up a world of gilded opulence, fantastic orgies. Even such commonplace things as a dress-suit and silk pyjamas had much the same effect. When he spoke of his mother’s maid she asked:

‘How many servants had you?’

‘Let’s see. ... Seven all told, including a dear old nanny who was treated like one of the family. And I’m

not including our gardeners at Prinkipo, or my sister's governess.'

The grotesque thing was that, though every word of this was true, it sounded to him like a fairy-tale. And it was also true that his father had died three years previously, after losing practically all his money. Actually there hadn't been any great change in their life at Pera. His mother had kept on one housemaid and the old nurse at their flat. The villa at Prinkipo had not been sold, no buyer being forthcoming, and as soon as the weather showed signs of warming up, the two women moved into it each spring.

Had he, Elie, really suffered much by the family *débâcle*? He had behaved just as hundreds of other young Turks had behaved when the depression caught them. In the main street of Pera they were to be seen strolling up and down for hours on end, declaiming poetry, turning into the cafés for a drink of *rakı* and a dish of small smoked fish, and, when fortune favoured, picking up a girl.

One day he had made a thousand Turkish pounds by acting as middleman in the sale of an old English freighter to the Greek Government. And if the deal in carpets had gone through ...

'Aren't you going out tonight, Monsieur Valesco?'

'Nothing doing till the first of next month. I'm on the rocks, and I'd rather stay here than go out without a penny in my pocket.'

'I know. . . And when your money comes in we shan't see you in my kitchen of an evening, not even for meals – anyhow, for the first few days.'

The washing up was over, and as usual Madame Baron went to the scullery to get her vegetable basket and a pail. Her husband rose with a sigh, and walked to the door. They heard him clumping heavily up the stairs.

'He's on duty on the night train,' Madame Baron explained. 'He'll be at Herbesthal tomorrow morning and come back again by the night train. Have you put his clothes out, Antoinette?'

'Yes, Ma. And I sewed on the button.'

Valesco, who looked bored, hovered round Elie for some moments, then said :

'Feel like a game of billiards? There's quite a decent table at the pub just up the street.'

'No, thanks.'

'In that case, I'm off to bed. Good night, everyone.'

The only sound in the room was the faint, intermittent squeak of the knife paring the potatoes, and now and again the thud of a potato dropped into the pail.

'It must be nice to travel about the world,' said Madame Baron pensively. 'I've never had no time to travel, and never shall have, I suppose.'

Elie saw Antoinette look up sharply, and noticed that her face was pale. Her eyes were fixed on him. She was trying to convey something to him, and pushing the newspaper in his direction.

'It's in one's young days one should travel,' Madame Baron continued. She had noticed nothing. Elie took his time before reaching for the newspaper.

A big heading splashed across three columns announced that eleven miners had been 'trapped by a fire-damp explosion in the Seraing coal-mine. Beside it was a caption in smaller type *The Paris Express Murder*.

'You don't often read the papers,' Madame Baron observed, without looking up. 'But I don't suppose our Belgian papers interest you much.'

'This morning a Brussels bank received by post from its local branch at Ghent three of the banknotes stolen

from M. Van der Cruyssen, who, as our readers will remember, was murdered in the Paris express.

'The police were notified at once, and we understand that enquiries are on foot at Ghent to trace the origin of these notes.

'In connexion with this case our esteemed contemporary, Le Journal, points out that a curious result will ensue from the difference between French and Belgian law.

'It seems that if the crime was committed before the train crossed the frontier, in Belgian territory, the murderer will be liable only to penal servitude for life, capital punishment being to all intents and purposes obsolete in Belgium.

'However, the Customs officials are positive that M. Van der Cruyssen, whom they knew by sight, was still alive when the train crossed the frontier. It follows that the murderer will be tried in France, under French law, and his head may fall under the guillotine.'

Conscious of Antoinette's eyes fixed on him, Elie struggled his hardest to assume an air of stoical indifference. But it was more than he could manage. His hands were so clammy that, when he put back the paper on the table, the imprint of his fingers could be seen on it.

Fortunately, just then Baron came downstairs in his railwayman's uniform, and his wife was too busy fussing round him to pay heed to Elie. After filling a Thermos flask with coffee and milk, she packed some sandwiches in a small tin he had brought down from his room.

Elie could still see Antoinette's face immediately in front of him, and he was struck by the fixity of the red-flecked pupils. He had a horrid feeling that he was going to faint; an absurd impression that the chair was giving way beneath him. Try as he might, he could not take his

eyes off the pale set face confronting him, on which he read a look of growing scorn, scarcely a trace of pity.

'Hope you'll soon get over your cold, Monsieur Elie.' The railwayman was shaking his hand, but Elie hardly noticed it. Madame Baron accompanied her husband to the doorstep; a gust of cold air entered the kitchen.

'So you're a coward!' Antoinette exclaimed the moment they were alone.

The words conveyed nothing to Elie. He dimly saw the gleaming tiles of the range, the yellow mound of potatoes in the enamelled pail, the singing kettle, and, in the foreground, the girl's white face. But all these things were so blurred, and seemed to be moving away from him at such a speed, that he brought both hands down heavily on the table, to steady himself.

The front door banged and Madame Baron's footsteps could be heard approaching. Antoinette whispered:

'Take care!'

Her mother eyed each in turn, with a particularly suspicious look for Antoinette. Twice already she had said:

'You might be more polite to Monsieur Elie.'

She picked up a potato and her knife.

'If I was you I'd go out for a bit, cold or no cold. It's half-past nine. You sleep much too much, in my opinion.'

But he seemed rooted to his chair, incapable of stirring from the kitchen.

'I wouldn't have much use for a man who was always hanging about the house,' Antoinette remarked.

'Nobody asked you your opinion, miss! ... I'm speaking for Monsieur Elie's good, like I was his ma.'

He rose with an effort.

'That's better! I've given you a latch-key, haven't I? Now mind you wrap your throat up well.'

He lingered for some minutes, sitting on his bed, until the silence of the room, in which every object was already

like an old friend, began to work on his nerves. He had only a light overcoat. He put it on, and knotted a woollen muffler round his neck.

What need had Antoinette to make him read that article in the paper? Those horrible last words especially, about his head falling under the guillotine?

Never for a moment had any such idea occurred to him. He forgot to turn off the light. Standing in the hall, he glanced round at the kitchen; through the glazed door he could see Antoinette and her mother still sitting beside the range, in an atmosphere of quiet so profound that he fancied he heard the ticking of the alarm-clock on the mantelpiece.

The moment he stepped outside he started shivering. The pavement was like iron underfoot. This was the first time he had seen the street by night, and it looked quite different.

All the houses were in darkness except the grocery, a little to the left. To see other lights he had to look far down the street, where a row of street-lamps marked the beginning of the town proper. Nobody was about. The only footsteps audible were a good five hundred yards away. Abruptly they ceased, and there was the distant tinkle of a bell, the sound of a closing door.

It was too cold to stand about, and he started walking blindly ahead, his hat pulled down over his eyes, his collar turned up. All the time he had a sensation that he was not in a real street, or on the outskirts of a real town.

The houses were not in an unbroken row, as in most working-class districts, nor were there any side-streets. After a block of ten or twelve houses, for instance, all exactly alike, would come an opening, a forlorn field, with sheds and dumps looming up behind it. Then another series of houses, another gap, from which railway-tracks shot out across the road. In the background

tall chimneys were belching flames into the darkness, and the cold radiance of the sky was mottled with patches of angry red.

Elie quickened his pace, though quite involuntarily. There was nowhere to go. He passed the windows of a café and saw in it the green rectangle of a billiard-table; presumably the one Valesco had referred to.

A family – father, mother, and two children hand in hand – came down the road towards him, and Elie caught a snatch of their conversation.

‘I’m always telling that sister-in-law of yours that she was a crazy fool to . . .’

The last word, or words, escaped him. Suddenly he decided he’d gone far enough. Only two hundred yards ahead were lights and shops, and a picture-house in which a bell was shrilling. He could see a number of people queued up at the entrance.

Elie stopped and gazed for a moment at the crowd, then turned quickly on his heel. It was all he could do to keep from breaking into a run. His nerve had given way; he felt as if he were suffocating.

He’d forgotten the latch-key. He walked on, taking long strides, as though escaping from pursuit; indeed, there were moments when he imagined he heard someone at his heels.

At last he saw the Barons’ house, the familiar doorway – and he had an impression of having lived there for years and years. The light streaming from the kitchen showed in the keyhole. He didn’t ring the bell like a visitor, but rattled the flap of the letter-box.

The eaves were dripping, and big drops splashed down his cheeks. A dark form blotted out the little patch of light and the door opened.

It was Antoinette. Without a word she stood aside to let him enter, her hand resting on the door-knob.

'Brr ! It's cold outside !' he muttered.

'You'd better go to bed.'

He went into his room and took off his overcoat. He had a vague hope Antoinette would follow him in and, though he made no actual gesture, he fixed his eyes on her imploringly.

'Anything you want?' she asked.

He had an inspiration

'Well, I'd rather like a fire tonight. It's awfully cold in here.'

She made no reply, but she left the door ajar – which showed she intended to come back. And a moment later he heard a sound which had already become familiar, the sound of coal being shovelled into the scuttle from the heap in the scullery. The two women in the kitchen exchanged some words.

'I'll make a hot grog for him,' said Madame Baron

Antoinette came back, a scornful look on her face, put down the scuttle, spread a newspaper on the floor, and took off the lid of the stove. It was full of cold cinders and she had to go down on her knees to empty it.

'Antoinette !' Elie whispered.

She showed no sign of having heard. Sitting on the edge of the bed, his arms dangling, he repeated her name.

'Yes? What do you want?' She spoke in a loud tone.

And suddenly he was afraid. There was a short silence, then he murmured, so softly that he wondered if she heard :

'You're very unkind. ...'

She made the cinders into a little heap and gathered them on the shovel. Then, crumpling up the newspaper and thrusting it into the stove, she said :

'Have you a match?'

It was such a joy to hear her voice that he rose with

clumsy eagerness and made as if to help her light the fire.

'I don't want your help I only asked you for a light.'

The paper blazed up and Antoinette dropped a handful of wood upon it. After watching the leaping flames for some moments, suddenly she swung round on Elie.

'Have you the notes here?'

He hesitated. But her tone had been so imperative that he went to the wardrobe and, standing on tiptoe, brought down the bundle of notes he had hidden on top of it.

'Hand them over!'

Quite naturally, as if she had a perfect right to do so, she dropped the bundle into the flames. As it didn't blaze up at once, she took the poker and stirred the notes to make them catch.

Elie stared at her in silence. He was straining his ears to hear if Madame Baron was still in the kitchen. At last he rose and went up to the girl, holding both his arms out in a gesture of humble entreaty.

'What do you want?' she asked in a matter-of-fact tone, and in her eyes was no anger, no pity; only cool contempt.

'Oh, Antoinette, if you only knew ..'

'Don't be a fool!' With a laugh she picked up the scuttle and tipped half its contents into the stove. After replacing the lid and making sure with a quick glance that all was in order, she said curtly:

'Now go to bed.'

Footsteps rang receding up the hall, the door of the kitchen shut, and the low murmur of the two women's voices grew still fainter.

'Antoinette!' He had called her name aloud without knowing it as he sat dejectedly on the edge of the bed, gazing vaguely in front of him. And suddenly he seemed to see her standing there before him, her body

taut under the black dress, the angular shoulders, young breasts set so oddly far apart, the sides of her small nose flecked with tiny freckles

Her tone had been cold, not to say hostile, when she told him to go to bed. And yet — ! He guessed that he was in her thoughts all day; he knew that, appearances notwithstanding, it was she who listened most attentively when he talked about his home.

‘Antoinette!’

He gazed at the empty bed, then at the lamp-switch, and started sweating again at the mere prospect of the long, dark hours before him. The stove had settled down to a measured roaring, like the noise of an express train. Leaning forward, he had a glimpse of his face in the glass over the wash-basin, and he looked away at once. When taking off his shirt he carefully avoided touching his neck.

His face had the crumpled look of someone who is weeping, but no tears were in his eyes. When at last he was lying in his bed, in the darkness, he clenched his fists and bit the pillow savagely, muttering to himself: ‘Antoinette!’

He was afraid, half crazed with fear, and he strained his ears to catch the sounds in the kitchen, where the mother and daughter were still at work

Then he heard Valesco, in the room above, locking his door, and, after some moments, a loud creak of the bed as he stretched himself on it.

VII

HIS watch had stopped, but Elie judged it must be a little after nine, for, looking out of his window, he saw the women from the adjoining houses flocking round a market-gardener’s barrow on the far side of the street. It

was a frosty morning, and they kept stamping their feet; one of them, he noticed, a fair-haired young woman, had her nose quite blue with cold. While they were pawing the vegetables in the baskets, the market-gardener put a tin trumpet to his mouth and blew a long shrill blast – at the first sound of which Madame Baron opened her door and hurried across the street, purse in hand

There was a knock at Elie's door

'Come in.' He supposed it was Antoinette coming to replenish the stove

But it was Valesco who entered. He had a hat and overcoat on, and some books under his arm

'Well, I must say, you're nice and snug in here. ... How's the cold today?'

Elie didn't tumble to it at once, and felt quite pleased at this visit, until the Rumanian, who was gazing out of the window, watching Madame Baron haggling for a cauliflower, remarked in a would-be casual tone

'I say, I wonder if you could do me a small service? Our worthy landlady's getting in quite a state because my monthly cheque from home is overdue. That's what she thinks, anyhow. As a matter of fact, it did turn up – ten days ago – but I've blued the lot. Could you spare me three hundred francs, to tide me over till next week? Got to help each other, haven't we, as we're under the same roof? ... Hulllo! You use the same make of razor as I do. Strictly between ourselves, though she's a very decent sort in her way, our landlady has old-fashioned ideas about money. Not that she's more grasping than most of that ilk, but – you know what I mean.'

Without a word Elie unlocked the suitcase in which he kept his wallet. He had a little over eight hundred francs in hand, the balance of the note changed at the hair-dresser's. He handed three hundred-franc notes to

Valesco, who stuffed them into his trouser-pocket with rather overdone casualness.

'Do the same for you, old chap, another time.'

A minute later his head could be seen passing, level with the window-sill, in the direction of the town, while in the background the little group of housewives went on ransacking the market-gardener's baskets

Elie had no clear idea of the effect this little incident had produced on him. But somehow it had left him with a load on his mind, which, he had a premonition, would not leave him throughout the day. He stared moodily at the open wallet; then fell to counting what remained. There were five hundred-franc notes, and besides these, he remembered he had some loose change in his pockets.

Say, five hundred and forty francs, all told.

Literally all told – for he had not a sou more in the world. The thousand-franc notes had been burnt, except the one he had given to Madame Baron. And that, too, was to all intents and purposes as worthless as if it had been destroyed. Antoinette was already aware of this. Quite possibly Madame Baron, too, would get to know it. And a month's board and lodging cost eight hundred francs!

He hadn't given a thought to this before, and now he was appalled at his predicament. Supposing, for instance, he had to leave at a moment's notice. .

But no, he wouldn't go away. Really this was an ideal refuge. 'They' would never dream of coming to look for him in a humble, out-of-the-way lodging-house.

Still, he foresaw trouble ahead. One of these days Madame Baron would be asking him for money, and what would happen then? Just now she made more fuss of him than of the others – simply because he paid most. He took full board, and was the only one to have meat

and vegetables at his evening meal; the only one, too, who had a fire in his room all day ...

She had come back to the house. The vegetable-seller had moved a little farther up the street. An almost empty tram went by. And Elie was still considering with dismay the prospect of being turned out of the house for lack of money. It would be nothing short of disaster! He was sorry now that he had lent those three hundred francs to Valesco. But how could he have got out of it? In his present position wasn't it up to him to make himself agreeable to everybody?

'Monsieur Elie!'

Madame Baron was calling him from the kitchen. When he joined her he found her taking a frying-pan off the range.

'I'd better give you your breakfast before I go up and do the rooms. How are you feeling today?'

When Baron was out Elie always used the wickerwork armchair, which gave a shrill, protesting squeak whenever he sat down in it. The kitchen smelt of eggs and bacon. Only Elie's corner of the table was laid.

'Anything else you'd like? I must go upstairs at once, as I've my ironing this afternoon.'

A minute later he heard her talking to Moise, and caught a word or two.

'... better in the kitchen ... I've no patience with you ... overcoat . your death of pneumonia!'

And presently Moise came down, carrying some exercise books which, after muttering 'Good morning', he dumped on the other end of the table. He started writing at once, in pencil. He had big, gnarled fingers, and pressed so hard on his pencil that the table quivered as he wrote.

Elie hardly knew what he was eating, the thought of the three hundred francs he'd given Valesco was

rankling in his mind, and in any case he had no appetite this morning. He almost envied Moise, who, though he lived on a mere pittance, was sure at least of having enough to pay his board and lodging here

Moise never looked up. His podgy hand crawled like a fat, assiduous slug over the paper, his back was hunched, the heat of the fire had brought a glow to his cheeks, and he looked the picture of contentment

Elie fetched the coffee-pot from the range and poured himself out another cup. Then, after lighting a cigarette, he stared gloomily in front of him, conscious of a curious sense of instability. Acting on a sudden impulse, he addressed Moise in Yiddish.

'Have you been here long?' he asked.

It had struck him that by using Yiddish he would remind the young Jew that there was a bond between them, and make him more favourably disposed.

But, without ceasing to write, Moise replied in French. 'A year.'

'Don't you speak Yiddish?'

'I speak French too — and I'm here to improve my French.'

At last he had raised his head, and his expression conveyed annoyance at being disturbed at his work. In fact, he looked so hostile that Elie retreated to his bedroom, and fell once more to contemplating the wintry scene in black and white outside: coal-grimed houses, pavements sparkling with rime.

The footsteps he could hear in the room immediately above must be Antoinette's, as her mother had gone up to the attics. After listening for a while he went back to the kitchen and picked up a magazine that was lying on the dresser. Moise had not stirred when he came in, and remained bent over his work.

'Don't you smoke?'

‘No.’

‘Don’t you like smoking — or is it to economize?’

No answer. Elie fluttered the pages of the magazine, glancing at the illustrations. He had got into the way of drinking coffee at all hours, helping himself from the coffee-pot, big as an urn, that always stood on the range. As he poured himself out another cup he said to the student :

‘Shall I pour you one out too?’

‘No, thanks ’

‘No tobacco No coffee And I wouldn’t mind betting, no strong drink either!’ He spoke in a bantering tone, with an almost affectionate smile. He was prepared to go to any lengths to break the ice between himself and his taciturn companion. But Moise went on stolidly writing, his furrowed brows propped on his left hand.

How strange to think that for seven years this young man had forgone all the amenities of life so as to carry on with his studies! And, Elie could have sworn it, had steered clear of women too!

No, there had been no woman in his life, nor any pleasure but the bleak joy of amassing knowledge. Madame Baron had explained to Elie how Moise would sit poring over his books all day in his fireless room, in a frayed old overcoat, a blanket wrapped round his shoulders; and how at first he used to wash his one and only shirt in the basin, stretching it at arm’s length so as to dispense with ironing. Finally, however, she had coaxed him into buying a second shirt, and now she washed his shirt once a week, free of charge.

Three foolscap pages were already covered with writing, and apart from the slight creak of the pencil and an occasional rattle of the table, there was no sound except the ticking of the alarm-clock, which stood at a quarter past ten.

'What do you make of me?' Elie asked abruptly. The question had been on the tip of his tongue for several moments, though he hardly knew what prompted him to utter it. All he knew was that he wanted to get on more intimate terms with Moise, who at once attracted and intimidated him.

And now at last the Polish Jew looked up and fixed his eyes on Elie; impassive, almost inhuman eyes.

'It's no concern of mine who you may be.'

Bitterly offended, Elie got up, and once again – as he did quite twenty times a day – walked back to his bedroom. But he found it so boring by himself that very soon he returned to the kitchen.

'Please listen,' he said impressively. 'I know that I can trust you, Monsieur Moise, and there's something I'd like you to do – supposing ... supposing anything happened to me.'

Actually there was no particular service he wanted of the young Jew, in any event. But it had occurred to him that by talking in this strain he might jolt the man out of his real, or feigned, indifference. And the words took effect. Moise looked up sharply, and even put down his pencil. Then he said gravely:

'That's enough. Will you kindly drop the subject?'

He rose from his seat. Elie wondered what his next move would be, and he felt the blood rising to his cheeks, his nerves tingling with suppressed excitement. By now he was in the mood to blurt out – almost anything.

'Surely, as members of the same race ...' he began tentatively.

Moise gathered up his books and papers, and took a step towards the door. In a low tone he said:

'What do you hope to gain by it?'

It wasn't clear if this remark referred to what had just been said, or, in a general way, to Elie's line of conduct.

'Oh, if you take it that way ...'

'I'm not taking anything in any way. It's none of my business. Still, as you've brought it up, there's one thing I will say. Madame Baron has been most kind to me, and I sincerely hope you won't bring any trouble on her.'

He went out without a backward glance, walked slowly through the hall and up the stairs.

Left to himself in the kitchen, Elie felt a rush of hopelessness, a sense of isolation such as he had never known before. The bottom had fallen out of his private universe, there was no foothold anywhere. He had had a similar feeling, though in a milder way, earlier in the morning, when counting up the contents of his wallet. . .

He had brought it on himself, by forcing his advances on Moise. Still, if he had acted thus, wasn't it because he had a feeling that the young man suspected something?

And, though alone, he conjured up an ironically superior smile, to neutralize the snub he had just received, and even murmured to himself: 'Of course he's jealous of me - that explains it.'

He put some more coal on the fire and drew his chair up to the fireside. Noticing that there was hardly any water in the saucepan in which the potatoes were boiling, he fetched a jug and added some. While he was doing this, Madame Baron entered, a pail in each hand. When she saw what he was up to, her face lit up.

'That's nice of you! You're not like Monsieur Moise, who'll sit there for hours on end with the saucepans right under his nose and never notice anything, even if the meat's burning to a cinder. Of course he's that wrapped up in his studies he don't notice things like we do . . .'

Elie accepted the compliment with a modest smile, and sat down again.

'You *must* find it dull here, Monsieur Elie.'

'Not in the least, I assure you.'

'Still, it's very different from what you're used to, isn't it?' From what you told me, you had such a gay life at home. Really I can't understand why you don't go out a bit. When I look at you and Antoinette I sometimes think that she's the boy and you're the girl – if you see what I mean.'

He was quite prepared, if she asked him, to do anything. to peel potatoes, even to scour the saucepans. Only one thing mattered: to be allowed to stay here, in this snug little kitchen with the white-enamelled walls, whose atmosphere and odours were already more familiar to him than those of his far-away home.

'Antoinette!' Madame Baron shouted 'Don't forget to bring the scuttles down with you.'

Elie hadn't seen Antoinette so far that morning, and there was more than curiosity in his eyes when she appeared in the doorway. But she deliberately ignored him, and, carrying the scuttles, walked straight across the room towards the scullery. Her mother scowled at her.

'Well, can't you wish Monsieur Elie "Good morning"?''

'Good morning.'

'Want to be smacked, do you?'

'Oh, please don't scold her!' Elie protested.

'I can't abide manners like that. Especially as you're always so nice and polite to her.'

Antoinette gave Elie a long stare with her red-flecked eyes, a stare that seemed to say: 'I'll pay you out for that, my man!'

And Elie quailed before her, and shrunk back still farther into the armchair, which for some moments had been giving him a queer impression of penning him in, like a wickerwork cage. ...

The mural decoration of the *Merryland* was nothing if not modern. The artist had begun by painting a series of wavy blue lines to suggest the sea. Between these were inserted shoals of pink, gold, and vividly green fishes, hovering in the same translucent medium as a fishing-boat and a larger craft resembling a Noah's Ark. In the foreground was a broad band of yellow, presumably a beach, on which reclined a bevy of bathing beauties in skilfully seductive poses.

The general effect was colourful, if crude, and, the room being comparatively small, only a few people were needed to create an atmosphere of gaiety. The lights changed colour frequently, which added to the illusion of an escape from drab reality.

The night was young, and so far hardly anybody had arrived. The band was playing only for the second time, and the professional dancers were turning up, singly or in pairs, shouting greetings to each other and, as they passed the bar, shaking the barman's hand. After that they gathered round a corner table, in front of empty champagne glasses, and waited ..

In a recess behind a pillar Sylvie was sitting beside the young man with the flowing tie; he had been coming regularly for the last three evenings.

'I can see you're worried about something,' he said. 'I do wish you'd tell me what it is. Or are you feeling ill?'

She gazed at him with unseeing eyes and answered absentmindedly.

'I'm quite all right, dear.'

He squeezed her hand, which he was holding under the table, and said beseechingly.

'Do please confide in me. You know there's nothing in the world I wouldn't do for you.'

Smiling, she stroked his hair, which he wore romantically long, but all the time she was watching the door.

and her thoughts were elsewhere. When Jacqueline appeared, in a moleskin coat, she rose with ill-concealed eagerness, saying to the young man :

'You'll excuse me for a moment, won't you ? I've something to say to the girl who's just come in.'

The cloakroom attendant helped Jacqueline out of her coat; after which Sylvie led her to the bar.

'Well ?'

'So far all's gone well. But, as I was coming in, I thought I saw a fellow snooping round the entrance. I asked Joseph if he'd noticed him, and he said "Yes"; the man had been standing there for an hour or so.'

The cabaret was still almost empty. The manager, in evening-dress, was at his usual place at the head of the stairs, gazing lethargically into the dance-room.

'I see your young man's here again,' Jacqueline remarked. 'Poor kid - it's quite pathetic !'

'Yesterday I told him to stop coming, and what do you think, he burst into tears ! ... Do you know, the cigarette-girl stuck him for twenty-five francs for a packet of cigarettes just now ! I told her it was a dirty trick; he can't afford it.'

But the thoughts of both were far from the young poet's troubles. It was Jacqueline who spoke first.

'Well, what's to be done next ?'

'I wish I knew. . . Bob, mix me one with a kick in it.'

She drank at a gulp the cocktail the barman handed her; then knitted her brows, thinking hard. Her eyes were fixed on the young poet sitting on the wall-sofa, but she saw him dimly, like a figure seen through badly focused glasses. At last she began :

'Now that they've traced the notes to Ghent ...' Then fell silent again.

'Look here !' Jacqueline said. 'I propose we have a

meal, to start with. I can't face trouble on an empty stomach, and, by the look of things, they'll be round here any moment.'

Just then a telephone-bell purred. When the manager went off to the telephone-box, Sylvie cocked an ear in his direction, for she had a presentiment that the call concerned her.

'Wait here,' she said.

As she stepped out on to the landing, the manager was returning from the box.

'Oh, good! There you are! The call's for you'

'Hullo?' She spoke in a low tone, so as not to be overheard by the manager, who was only a few yards away.

'Is that Mademoiselle Sylvie?' a voice enquired. 'I want to talk to Mademoiselle Sylvie herself.'

'Yes, it's me.'

'The porter at the *Palace* speaking.' He dropped his voice till it was barely audible. 'Listen! The police have just been round. They've found out about your having stayed here with Monsieur Nagear. I thought I'd better let you know, in case ...'

The manager had his eyes on her as she walked back to the bar. She gave a smile in passing to her young poet, who gazed at her adoringly.

'We're for it!' she told Jacqueline.

'What do you mean?'

'They've found out about the *Palace* Where are the notes?'

'In my bag.'

'Hand it over.'

Under cover of the projecting edge of the big mahogany bar Sylvie managed to extract the notes without being seen, and slipped them under her bodice.

'What do you propose to do? And how about *me*? What ought I to say?'

'Oh, you're safe enough. I only asked you to change the notes. You knew nothing about them.'

'And that's the truth. When I went to Ghent I didn't know ...'

Two couples were dancing. Furtively Sylvie squeezed her friend's fingers.

'Don't worry, pet. Leave it to me.'

When he saw her coming back to him, the young man beamed with delight.

'Your friend's nothing like so pretty as you are,' he exclaimed with naïve eagerness. 'What'll you drink?'

'We've had a drink already.'

'Yes, but he's taken the glasses away.'

She scowled at the waiter, though, after all, he was only doing his duty in obliging customers to order drinks.

'All right. An orangeade.'

In some ways it was a nuisance having this sentimental youth on her hands; still, his company made the situation easier than if she'd been alone. Though Jacqueline had turned up, Sylvie continued watching the door, and once again she had a presentiment – on hearing heavy footsteps coming up the stairs, and the voice of the manager, announcing.

'This way, sir. The show's just going to start.'

But no one entered, nor was there any sound but that of the clubroom door opening and closing. For, officially, the *Merryland* passed for a private club; this enabled alcoholic drinks to be served on the premises. And, for appearance' sake, a small room on the other side of the landing had been fitted up as a reading-room, with magazines strewn on the table, and two big leather armchairs.

'Does this ... this gay life really give you pleasure?' The young man blushed at his audacity.

Without stopping to think, she answered almost angrily:

‘“Gay” do you call it?’

But she let it go at that. What was the point of trying to explain things to this guileless youth? She was cocking her ear towards the clubroom, though she knew it was quite impossible to hear what was being said there.

Jacqueline, who was wearing a mauve silk frock, had chosen a seat beside the band, and had already danced twice. The young man said timidly:

‘I hope you’re not offended. I shouldn’t have asked you that.’

‘Offended? Not a bit.’

Her one desire was for him to keep his mouth shut, for her nerves were on the stretch. At any moment the manager’s portly form would show up in the doorway. At last she could bear the suspense no longer.

‘Excuse me for a moment.’

She jumped up and hurried to the bar.

‘Give me another cocktail! Quick!’

No sooner had she drunk it than she saw the manager at the door, beckoning to her.

She stole a quick glance at her reflexion, sandwiched between two bottles, in the mirror behind the bar, settled her hair, and whispered to the barman:

‘Tell Jacqueline there’s nothing to worry about.’

The manager watched her coming towards him.

‘There’s a man here ..’ he began.

‘I know.’

She opened the door of the clubroom, and as she closed it again she saw a man of about forty in an overcoat with a velvet collar, pretending to be looking at the pictures in the magazines.

‘You’re Sylvie Baron, eh? Sit down, please.’

He showed her a card with ‘Detective-Inspector’ under his name.

‘Know why I’ve come, Mademoiselle Baron?’

‘Of course.’

She saw that he was taken aback by her prompt ‘Of course.’

‘Good I’m glad to hear you say that It’ll make things easier. I need hardly tell you that I shall be questioning your friend Jacqueline presently – and that I know a good deal more than you suspect.’

‘Really?’

The room was as bare as the parents’ waiting-room in a small school, or a dispensary. Indeed, the only difference was that the air was throbbing with the muffled stridence of a jazz-band

‘Now then,’ the detective said, ‘let’s hear what you have to say.’

‘I’ll answer your questions.’

He looked reassuringly human and had already bestowed appreciative glances on the low V of Sylvie’s frock.

‘Are you acquainted with a man called Elie or Elias Nagear?’

‘You know I am. You’d only to look at the visitors’ book at the *Palace*’

‘Where did you meet him first?’

‘On board the *Théophile-Gautier*. He embarked at Constantinople’

‘And you became his mistress?’

‘His mistress?’ That’s much too big a word for it. We happened to be travelling together all the way to Brussels, and naturally we palled up a bit.’

‘Do you mean to say you weren’t his mistress?’

She shrugged her shoulders, and sighed :

‘That’s not the word for it, as I said just now. If you can’t see the difference .’

‘Did you know that Nagear was short of money?’

‘He never talked to me about money matters.’

'Did he ever tell you, or imply, that he was going to commit a crime?'

She looked him in the eyes.

'Look here! What's the good of beating about the bush? I wasn't born yesterday, and of course I can see what you're driving at. If he's committed a crime I know nothing about it. All I know is that when I left the hotel bedroom last Wednesday at about eleven he was still in bed with a bad cold. I had my lunch outside, and when I came back late in the afternoon I found him gone.'

'What about his luggage?'

She thought quickly. Almost certainly he had learnt at the *Palace* that she'd gone out next day with Elie's luggage.

'Oh, he left it at the hotel.'

'Quite so. And when did Nagear return?'

She stood up – it was easier to think standing – and the detective followed her with his eyes as she paced up and down the room.

'He rang me up from the station and asked me to bring his luggage, as he had a train to catch.'

'Yes? What did you do then?'

The police officer had slipped the rubber band off a small note-book, in which he was scribbling away.

'I did as he asked me. He gave me fifty thousand francs, and then took the Warsaw express.'

He looked up at her sharply, but she didn't turn a hair.

'Oh, he took the Warsaw train, did he? What time was that?'

She smiled to herself – for she had pat the times of all the international expresses. She'd taken them often enough for that!

'Nine thirty-six. Nagear apologized for leaving me so abruptly and, as I said, gave me fifty thousand francs.'

She put her hand down her frock, produced the little wad of notes and laid them on the table.

'In Belgian notes?' The detective sounded surprised.

'No, in French notes.'

'Ah, you changed them! In Brussels, I suppose.'

'You know quite well I didn't. And you know, too, that girls like us are always suspected of having done something wrong when they're seen with a lot of money on them. I got a friend of mine to change the notes at Ghent and Antwerp.'

'Had you no suspicions? Didn't you check the numbers?'

'I never read the newspapers.'

'Then how's it you know now?'

'Bob, the barman here, told me what had happened to Van der B' — she pulled herself up — 'Van der Cruyssen, and I guessed . . '

'Then why didn't you assist justice by making a report to the police?'

'Assist justice? Why should I? That's your job, not mine.'

There was something like a smile on her face, indeed her self-possession was amazing. And while she spoke she never took her eyes off the detective.

'That's all very well, but suppose I hadn't got on your tracks ...?'

'I knew you would, sooner or later.'

'Are you prepared to confirm on oath the statements you have just made?'

'Certainly. ... And now, if you've nothing more to ask, I'd like to go back to the dance-room. Any objection?'

She gave him a quick smile, and he, too, was smiling as he snapped the elastic band round his note-book.

'*Au revoir*,' she said, her fingers on the door-handle.

'Right I'll see you again later.'

The manager had hardly time to step away from the keyhole, but Sylvie walked past him as if she hadn't noticed anything. Jacqueline was drinking champagne with two men in dinner-jackets, an elderly man and a young one, father and son perhaps. With a flutter of her eyelashes Sylvie conveyed to her that all was going smoothly.

The young poet was moping in a corner; he seemed to have given up hope of seeing her again that evening, for he looked quite startled when he saw her coming.

'Hope you haven't been too bored,' she said

'No . not at all. I was waiting for you.' The mere sight of her had made him blush, and to cover his confusion he asked: 'Won't you have something to drink?'

'What? Has that damned waiter taken away the glasses again? Really he's the limit.' Seeing him go by, she shouted at him. 'Henri, what do you mean by it? Didn't I tell you. ?'

'It doesn't matter in the least,' the lad broke in.

She looked him full in the eyes, and he started blushing again. Even his ears went scarlet. Suddenly she asked:

'Are you living with your people?'

'No. They're at Liège. I've a little room, a sort of attic really, in the Schaerbeek district. But when my book comes out ...'

The manager had left his post at the top of the stairs and entered the dance-room so as to have a better view of Sylvie. Jacqueline was giggling as she nibbled the green almonds which she had persuaded the man beside her to order, and constantly throwing questioning glances at Sylvie over her shoulder.

'Do you really like being here?' Sylvie asked.

'Well - er - not really. But so long as I'm with you ...'

Bob, too, was staring at her; as indeed were all the staff. Obviously the word had gone round.

'Pay.'

'Do you want me to go?'

'We'll go to your place.'

'But —!' He was horrified at the idea of taking an elegant young woman like Sylvie to his garret.

'Do what I tell you, my dear. It isn't Sunday every day of the week.'

As he counted his change he looked profoundly puzzled. It wasn't a Sunday — so what on earth did she mean by that last remark?

'No, we don't need a taxi,' she said to the commissionaire as they stepped on to the pavement. And, linking her arm with the young man's, she said almost affectionately: 'Let's take a tram.'

VIII

Now and again Elie opened his eyes and saw heads bobbing past, level with his window-sill, in the bleak morning light. He learnt it was a Friday, for amongst the others he saw Madame Baron go by with a hat on — which meant that she was on her way to the weekly market in the Square Domb, too, had gone out, and a sound of slipped footsteps overhead told him that Valesco was up and dressing.

For the fourth or fifth time he dozed off; he made a point of staying in bed until the other lodgers had gone out and he could be sure of having the place to himself. The trouble was that every five minutes the clanging of a tram-bell jerked him awake and, as the tram-stop was almost in front of his window, it was hopeless trying to get to sleep till it had started off again.

The postman passed. A letter rattled in the letter-box

and Elie was in half a mind to get up and see for whom it was, but his energy failed him and he rolled over, with his face towards the wall. How much more time went by? In a half-dream he seemed to hear Valesco going out. Then, with the dramatic suddenness of a shot fired in a crowd, his door banged. Someone had come in, and before Elie had time to turn his head, a hand snatched back the counterpane which he had pulled up over his chin.

Something, perhaps the rustle of a dress, perhaps a whiff of scent, told him it was Antoinette; otherwise he'd have postponed opening his eyes. Her face was so white that the freckles showed like angry blotches. With a severe look she handed him a sheet of paper.

'Read this.'

'What's the time?'

'Damn the time! Read it!'

For some moments he played the part of a man but half awake, while she stood, silent and hostile, at the bedside. At last, screwing up his eyes, he read.

'Antoinette, use your brains and try to understand .. The new lodger has got to leave at once. It's terribly important. You may have trouble, as he seems to have dug himself in, but he's got to go. Tell him from me that the police know everything and his name will be in the papers within the next few hours. He still has time to make a getaway. Don't tell Ma. Your affectionate sister, — Sylvie.'

Though he had read the letter a dozen times, Elie seemed unable to take his eyes off it. And Antoinette, who in her black pinafore looked like a schoolgirl waiting her turn to say her lesson, finished by losing patience.

'Well? What about it?'

He was sitting on the edge of the bed, barefooted; his

pyjama jacket was unbuttoned and revealed a lean, rather hairy chest. Slowly his fingers parted, letting the letter drop on the rug, but they went on clenching and unclenching, as if kneading some invisible object. Antoinette's face hardened.

'Stop playing the fool!'

Immediately the hands ceased moving. Elie raised his head, but so far he hadn't fixed on an expression, nor decided what line to take. His forehead was deeply furrowed, whether with distress or cogitation it was impossible to tell. But there was a wary look in his eyes, a glint of anger and suspicion.

'Do you really want to turn me out?' he murmured brokenly, striking a pose of profound dejection.

'Whether I want it or not, you've got to go.'

The letter itself hadn't been much of a surprise. It was Antoinette's remark that made him lose all self-control. From now on he was no longer play-acting, and there was something so shocking in this sudden breakdown of his morale that the girl was, for the first time, really scared.

He rose slowly to his feet and the movement brought his face within a few inches of hers. His lips were twitching, there was frenzy in his eyes, his breath came in feverish gasps.

'So you'd betray me to my enemies, would you?'

She wanted to look away, but a horrid fascination, like that which draws a crowd to watch the struggles of a man who has just been run over, held her eyes on him.

'Answer me!'

His face was grey, unwashed, unshaven, and sweat was pouring down it. His pyjamas were soiled and crumpled. The sight of his abject fear made her feel sick.

'Don't!' She shrank away.

'Antoinette! Look into my eyes.'

She could feel his hot breath fanning her cheeks, and it was all she could do to keep from screaming.

'Look at me' I insist. Don't forget I have a sister too. Suppose you had a brother and .. and he was in my position.'

Suddenly, to her consternation, he fell on his knees before her, clasped her hands in his.

'Don't say such cruel things. Please, please don't tell me to go. Once I leave this house I'm finished, and you know it. It will be all your fault. I .. I don't want to die '

'Get up '

'Not before you've promised. ...'

She drew back two steps, but he shuffled after her, on his knees

'Antoinette! Promise me you won't do that You remember what they said in the paper, don't you? In France ..'

'Oh, for heaven's sake shut up!' she almost screamed.

As she spoke her body suddenly grew rigid, her heart gave a lurch. A head had just passed the window, halting a moment on the way. It was Madame Baron returning from her marketing, and unthinkingly she had glanced into the room.

A latch-key grated in the door; she heard it open. Then came a soft thud as Madame Baron deposited her market-bag on the hall floor.

'Get up!'

It was too late. Already Madame Baron's plump black-clad form was looming in the doorway. She had a hat on, and this made her look more stern and dignified than was her wont. She gazed first at her daughter, then at the young man in pyjamas rising awkwardly to his feet.

'Go up to your room,' she said to Antoinette, after a

moment's hesitation. 'And look sharp about it. I'll talk to you later.'

She was holding herself in. No sooner was her daughter out of the room than she shut the door with a bang and rounded on Elie

'Well, you dirty swine, ain't you ashamed of yourself – making up to a little girl half your age? What you deserve is a good hiding, and I've a very good mind ...'

She actually raised her fist, and he shrank away, shielding his head with his arm.

But then her eyes fell on his face and she noticed that his cheeks were deathly pale, glistening with tears and sweat. And suddenly, to her amazement, he started trembling violently, breathing with a sort of rattle, his teeth chattering convulsively.

Mistrustfully she watched him back into a corner of the room and start pounding the wall with his clenched fists.

'What on earth's come over you, man?'

The harsh, vulgar voice was like a summons back to reality, but it took no effect on Elie. He went on beating the wall, and she seemed to hear him whimper.

'Mother! Oh, Mother ...!'

All his manhood had left him. In the loosely fitting pyjamas he looked like an emaciated, half-starved child in the grip of panic terror

'Going balmy, are you?'

As she spoke she noticed the letter lying on the floor, and recognized Sylvie's writing.

She read the letter, though there was no need to do so; suddenly the truth – of which till now she had not had the faintest inkling – had dawned on her. As she looked up from the letter Elie swung round and faced her, still trembling with emotion, his hands pressed to the wall behind him as if bracing himself to spring forward.

'So that's it,' Madame Baron said, letting the letter slip from her fingers. Then her legs seemed to give way and she leaned heavily on the table. 'Well, I never! What a fool I've been! I never suspected a thing. Of course, I must say, you went about it cleverly.'

She had a feeling that he was going to clasp her hands, perhaps go on his knees to her as well, and start imploring her. .. Gruffly she said:

'None of that nonsense! It won't work with me. Get dressed and clear out – at once! Got it? If I find you here in a quarter of an hour's time I'll have the police in.'

She began to move towards the door, but stopped abruptly, halted by the most appalling sound that had ever reached her ears – one of those long-drawn screams that are only heard in moments of supreme catastrophe, when voices lose all semblance of humanity and sound like the squeals of dying animals.

Elie had staggered to the bed and flung himself across it, his arms spread out, his fingers scrabbling on the counterpane, and he went on screaming, arching his body like someone in convulsions. Now and again, between the screams, came that low, desperate, whimpered, 'Mother!'

Madame Baron glanced nervously towards the window, fearing passers-by would hear; then back again at the writhing form on the bed.

'Steady on!' she said, and was surprised by the sound of her voice. 'If you go on making that noise we'll have all the neighbours in.' She took a step towards him, and added in a less assured tone: 'You know, you can't possibly stay on in this house.'

She took off her hat wearily and dropped it on the table.

'Now do try to pull yourself together. You've still time to get away without being caught.'

She walked hastily to the door, and listened; then turned the key and came back to the bed.

'Please pay attention, Monsieur Elie. I'm speaking for your own good. ...'

*

The kitchen was empty, the alarm-clock ticking away for its own benefit alone, the kettle singing to itself, filling the air with steam. Now and then a shower of red cinders would rattle through the grate into the ashpan. The window-panes were misted over.

Only one end of the table was laid — at Elie's place — and his breakfast, two eggs and a slice of bacon, stood waiting to be cooked, on a plate beside the range.

The shopping-bag, from which the heads of a bundle of leeks protruded, remained where Madame Baron had left it, beside the hall door.

The only sounds in the room were the ticking of the clock and an occasional tinkle of the kettle-lid. Never had the house seemed so forsaken. Every door was shut, and for once no pails of water, no mops or brooms were lying about in the passage. There was an atmosphere of hushed suspense, like that when some great domestic event is impending — when, for instance, everyone is waiting for a woman to have a baby.

Presently a sound of footsteps came from Elie's bedroom. The door emitted a loud creak, as though it were being opened for the first time for years. Carrying her hat, Madame Baron walked past her shopping-bag, unheeding; then remembered, and went back to fetch it.

On entering the kitchen she was half-suffocated by the cloud of steam that greeted her, and, hurrying to the window, she opened it a few inches, letting in a gush of icy air.

There was a whole series of ritual gestures to be performed, and she went through them methodically, with an unusually thoughtful look on her face. She took the almost empty kettle off the range and filled it at the tap, she placed a saucepan on the fire, then hung her hat on a peg and unpacked the vegetables on the portion of the table which was unladen. Finally she glanced at the clock. It pointed to twenty past ten.

Taking a paring-knife from the drawer and putting on an apron, she walked back to the hall, and shouted :

‘Monsieur Moise!’

Only then did her feelings get the better of her; the second time she called, her voice broke on a sob. And, on returning to the kitchen, she wiped her eyes and nose with a corner of her apron.

There were footsteps overhead, and presently Moise came down the stairs. Madame Baron was skinning onions for the stew, but the onions did not account for the tears in her eyes. Moise noticed them at once, and frowning heavily, enquired :

‘What’s wrong, Madame Baron?’

‘Please sit down, Monsieur Moise. I’ve something to tell you.’ She avoided looking at him, but he could still see her face and it was so woebegone that he lowered his eyes. ‘I know I can trust you, Monsieur Moise. It’s something I daren’t even tell my husband. You know how he is; he’d only start bawling the roof off, and that wouldn’t take us any further, would it?’ She blew her nose and, bending forward, slowly closed the door of the range. ‘I don’t know how to start. ... First of all, though, you must promise not to breathe a word of this to anyone.’

She was cutting up the onions and letting the slices fall into the blue enamel saucepan.

‘I’ve just learned that our new lodger, Monsieur Elie ...’

She happened to look up, and the first glance was enough.

'What! You knew it? ... And I was that silly I never suspected a thing! I treated him just like the other lodgers, in fact I made a fuss of him. What a fool I was! This morning I told him he had to go I didn't like doing it, but seeing as my husband's a government employee ...' She paused abruptly, her knife suspended in mid-air; a hateful picture of the scene in Elie's bedroom had risen before her eyes 'I never dreamt a man could get in such a state In all my born days I've never seen nothing like it, not even at the pictures. He bit his lips till the blood came, and he kept howling for his ma '

Unconsciously she was glancing over her shoulder towards the hall and the door behind which that dreadful scene had taken place.

'You know what they do to ... to murderers in France, don't you?' And when he made no answer she added with a nervous sob. 'They chop their heads off!'

Dropping the onion and knife on the table, she lifted her apron with both hands and hid her face in it Moise murmured awkwardly :

'Oh, Madame Baron .. please don't take on like that!'

Her shoulders heaved and, her face still hidden in the apron, she said weakly .

'Don't take no notice. I'll be better in a minute. Only, it was such a shock you know. ...'

Timidly Moise laid his hand on her shoulder; that was the furthest he dared go.

'If you'd seen him!' she moaned 'He looked such a poor miserable little shrimp, shivering and shaking in his pyjamas like a kid that's scared out of his wits. One couldn't but be sorry for him. All skin and bone. .. '

'Madame Baron, do please compose yourself. You'll only make yourself ill.'

She wiped her eyes and cheeks and, as she smoothed out her apron, conjured up a feeble smile.

'There! I'm better now.'

The window had blown open. She went and drew it to.

'I may have made a mistake. But he swore to me that if I let him stay a few days longer he'd be safe. He has five hundred francs left; I saw them. But five hundred won't take him far.'

A new thought waylaid her. She raised the lid of the soup-tureen and, after fumbling feverishly in it, dropped the thousand-franc note into the fire.

'I'd never have breathed a word of this to anyone else. But I know you'll give me good advice, Monsieur Moise. Don't you agree that we can let him stay on for a day or two more? The police think he's miles away, and anyhow they'd never dream of looking for him in a quiet little house like this, would they?' Fearing she had not yet convinced him, she added. 'It was when he spoke about his ma. ... Somehow it made me think of yours, Monsieur Moise. Of course, if all he had to fear was being sent to prison, it would be quite different. You see what I mean, don't you?'

She had started peeling onions again and her eyes were watery, though not now with tears. She was still snuffing a little, but her composure was returning.

'Good gracious! I'll never have the lunch ready in time at this rate. ... We've Monsieur Domb and Monsieur Valesco to think of, don't forget. If there's anything about him in the papers, they're bound to notice. If that happens, I'd rather it was you who told them.'

Her thoughts took a new turn.

'Have you seen Antoinette about?'

'I heard her going to her bedroom just now.'

She opened the door and shouted: 'Antoinette!'

No answer. No sound of an opening door overhead. Still carrying her kitchen-knife, Madame Baron hurried up the stairs

‘What are you doing up there?’

Antoinette was doing nothing. There was no heating of any kind in her room, and though the skylight was shut tight, cold air kept seeping in, owing, perhaps, to the thinness of the glass.

Antoinette was lying on her bed, gazing up at the slanted ceiling.

‘Why didn’t you answer when I called?’

Never before had Madame Baron seen that strange, set look in her daughter’s eyes, or her face so deathly calm. Indeed there was something so disquieting about it that she hurried to the bed and gave her arm a little tug.

‘Well? What do you want?’ the girl said fretfully.

‘You gave me quite a turn! Come downstairs. You’ll catch your death of cold if you stay up here ... Why are you looking at me like that?’

‘Where is he?’

‘In his room.’ How was she to explain things to her daughter? ‘You wouldn’t understand,’ she said vaguely, ‘but I’ve my reasons. I’ve told him he can stay a few days longer. But you’re not to have anything to do with him. If he speaks to you, don’t answer.’

Antoinette seemed to wake up with a start, giving her head a curious backward jerk, as if her neck had gone numb and she had to free it.

‘What I can’t get over,’ her mother said, ‘is the silliness of Sylvie to let herself be mixed up in that sort of thing. ... Come along.’

They went downstairs together. When Moise saw Antoinette he was startled at her changed appearance.

‘I’ll talk to Domb and Valesco,’ he said hastily.

‘Thanks. ... Antoinette, go and get the butter from the

cupboard.' She bestowed a smile of gratitude on Moise. 'That's very kind of you, I'm sure. ... I'm doing the right thing, don't you agree?'

By way of answer Moise, too, smiled vaguely; then started towards the stairs.

'Why not come and study by the fire?' she called after him.

Apparently he didn't hear.

The life of the house resumed its usual course. The onions began to sizzle on the range, while Madame Baron fell to chopping up the meat for the stew. Suddenly, without looking up from her work, she said to her daughter :

'You know what your dad's like; it wouldn't do for him to know. You'd better look through the paper before he reads it and, if there's anything, tear the page off.'

Antoinette, too, made no reply.

'Now go and do out Monsieur Domb's room. Don't forget it's the day to change the sheets '

At half-past eleven Baron appeared. He had been on duty all night and had the rest of the day off. After hanging his coat on a peg in the hall he entered the kitchen, sniffed the air, and asked :

'Grub ready?'

'In a few minutes.'

His wife placed his slippers in front of the wicker arm-chair, and Baron proceeded to take off his boots, socks, and collar.

'Terrible cold it can be round about Luxembourg. This morning just after sunrise we saw a boar floundering about in the snow.'

'Is there much snow there?'

'Nearly four foot deep in places.'

She was taking care to keep her back towards him, but a moment came when he had a glimpse of her face.

'What's wrong with you?'

'Wrong with me?'

'Your eyes are all red.'

'Oh, that's the onions.' She pointed to the onion skins on the table

'Hurry up with my grub. I want to get to bed.'

She bustled about, took the potatoes from the oven where they had been browning, and laid the table. Valesco entered, bringing wafts of frozen air lodged in the folds of his overcoat

'Sorry, Monsieur Valesco, but I must ask you to wait a bit. My husband's been on duty all night and I'll give him his lunch first.'

'Has my friend been round this morning?'

'No one's been. Oh, by the way, you'd better go up to Monsieur Moise's room. He has something to tell you.'

'Something to tell me? What on earth can it be?'

She didn't feel at ease till she heard his footsteps on the stairs

'Has he paid?' asked Monsieur Baron

'Yes, he settled up yesterday. What's more, he brought a cake for supper, I've kept a slice for you.'

'Where's Antoinette?'

'Doing the rooms. She was a bit late this morning getting started.'

He began eating by himself, sometimes pausing to push up his straggling grey moustache.

'No news from Sylvie?'

'Our Sylvie never was one for letter-writing - you should know that.'

To conceal her nervousness Madame Baron busied herself with her pots and pans. When Domb entered, after bowing to her from the doorway, Baron was drinking his coffee and finishing off the slice of cake.

‘Lunch ready, Madame Baron?’

‘In a couple of minutes, Monsieur Domb’

He always conveyed an impression of extreme cleanliness, as if, unlike the other lodgers, he never omitted a morning bath. With another bow he started to leave the kitchen.

‘Where are you off to?’

‘I thought of going to my room.’

‘Why not wait here?’ You’re not in the way at all’ Madame Baron was always a little flustered by the Pole’s exaggerated courtesy. ‘There’s a chair The others will be here in a moment.’

Baron rose, yawned, stretched his arms and said to his wife -

‘Don’t forget to wake me at four.’

On his way out he planted a clumsy kiss on his wife’s hair, while she called towards the doorway -

‘Monsieur Valesco! Monsieur Moise! Antoinette! Lunch!’

To divert attention from her reddened eyes, she tried to put on a more smiling face than usual. It was only when she heard the footsteps of her young folk on the stairs that it struck her she’d forgotten someone.

‘Monsieur Elie! Come to lunch.’

Some tense moments followed, while the others took their seats round the table. At last Madame Baron, who was listening intently, heard a key turn in a lock and the creak of an opening door.

While she busied herself putting coal on the fire and stirring it with the poker, she heard the kitchen door open and shut and ‘Good mornings’ being exchanged.

At last she turned and saw Elie at his usual place, his cheeks only a shade paler than usual, only a hint of discomposure in his eyes. He had shaved, his hair was smoothly brushed, and, as he took the plate that was

handed him, he said to Antoinette in a low but steady voice :

‘May I trouble you for the bread, Mademoiselle?’

Was it because today he was wearing a collar and tie? For some reason Antoinette’s gaze settled on his neck. Then with startling suddenness she jumped up from her chair and, before anyone could say a word, ran out, slamming the door behind her.

Madame Baron started to follow, but thought better of it.

‘She’s not feeling very well today,’ she explained.

Moise, who didn’t take the same meal as the others – it cost five francs – extracted from his biscuit-tin a loaf and a pat of butter, and put them on the table. Like an orchestra tuning up, there began a confused, steadily increasing noise, the rattle of knives and forks on plates, a clink of glasses, and when at last a voice made itself heard above these sounds, it was Elie’s

‘It’s terribly cold out of doors, isn’t it?’

It was his ordinary voice, a trifle thickened perhaps by the food he had in his mouth.

No one answered.

IX

THE water-jug in Moise’s attic-room had burst, and for several days thereafter the block of ice that had done the mischief could be seen glimmering, like a translucent cannon-ball, in a corner of the yard

At every moment voices, plaintive or indignant, could be heard protesting :

‘The door’s open again ! For heaven’s sake shut it !’

The temperature was far below freezing-point, but the sky was cloudless, the air crystal-clear; indeed, there were four consecutive days of brilliant sunshine.

'Do please shut the door!' wailed Madame Baron

For the kitchen was the only warm place in the house, and everyone made use of it from early morning on. The lodgers came there, one after the other, to get hot water, and, as it was impossible to heat enough water for all at once, hung round the range in their pyjamas, waiting their turn. The first thing Madame Baron did each day was to strew sea-salt on the doorstep and the pavement in front, where ice had formed overnight, and when she came back to the kitchen her fingers were numb with cold, her nose was scarlet

There was always a scuffle for the place nearest the fire, though as a matter of fact the cold seemed more productive of good-humour than otherwise. Even the children running past the house on their way to school, their faces wrapped in Balaclavas, were hoping that the frost would last, the mercury fall still lower. The next-door neighbour, whose pipes had burst, kept dropping in at all hours for water, a pail in each hand

'It seems the Zuider Zee is beginning to freeze over.'

Everyone was thrilled – Elie no less than the others. He was the first each morning to go out to read the thermometer which they had hung up in the yard. On his return to the kitchen he would announce the latest figure with an air of triumph.

'Twenty degrees of frost. But of course we register far lower temperatures than that in Anatolia, almost every winter.'

His eyes roved round the table from one face to another. Domb never responded, but Elie made a point of feigning not to notice this. Valesco now and then gave a polite smile, to show that he was listening; Moise, in any case, never took part in conversations.

'One year I started off from Trebizond in my car to go to Persia, where my father had business interests ...

I suppose you know that practically all the traffic in those parts consists of camel-caravans.'

'What? Ain't there no railway?' Baron seemed surprised.

'Not yet. The plans have been drawn up, but that's as far as they have got. Only imagine the distances to cover! We reckon them in thousands of miles in our part of Europe.'

Really Baron was now the only one to display much interest in Elie's chatter. He may have been a trifle puzzled by the reserved attitude of the others, but it wasn't marked enough for him to comment on it.

Elie, on the other hand, was more loquacious than ever. He had got over his cold and stiff neck, ate heartily, and went on having, unlike the other lodgers, a full-length dinner every night. Indeed, he had never seemed in better form.

On the first night everybody had eyed him curiously as he piled his plate with meat and vegetables, while the others were content with bread and butter. But he seemed quite unconscious of their scrutiny. Noticing a plate of cheese in front of Baron, he asked politely.

'That Roquefort looks excellent. Would you mind passing it?'

Antoinette, however, seemed to have lost her appetite completely, and her father was quite perturbed.

'You're not looking at all fit, my dear. I've never seen your face so peaked. I suppose it's something to do with your age. Growing pains, most likely. But that's all the more reason to eat well.'

Elie promptly put in a remark.

'Yes, my sister got like that when she was Antoinette's age. In fact, we were afraid of losing her, and Mother packed her off to Greece for a change of air. Ever been in Greece?'

'It's just thoughtlessness,' Madame Baron whispered to Moise 'He don't seem to realize . . .'

Earlier in the day he had told her in a quite matter-of-fact tone .

'You know, you needn't worry, Madame Baron, about the money I owe you I've written to my sister, and it should be here in a week's time '

She had thought it wiser not to reply, and busied herself with her cooking. But when she noticed him picking up the bag of mussels she had brought that morning, and opening a drawer to get a knife, she couldn't help remarking

'Whatever are you up to?'

'Oh, I'm going to give you a hand at trimming these mussels.'

'Please don't bother, Monsieur Elie.'

'It's not the least bother. I like doing it '

He was constantly in the kitchen. Sometimes she managed to get him out of it, but he nearly always came back in a few minutes, on some pretext or other.

'Look here, I've got to wash the floor,' she would say 'Please go to your room '

He thought up another trick; he left his bedroom door ajar, and no one could enter or leave the house without being hailed by him.

'Hullo, Valesco! Come and warm your hands for a moment Madame Baron wants the kitchen to herself just now. A cigarette? ... You see how right I was! There's not a word about me in the papers today.'

He was always the first to read them, and would even snatch Baron's *Gazette* from his hand when he was settling down to read it.

'May I have just a peep? .. Thanks so much.'

When satisfied that there was no reference to himself, he handed the paper back, with a wink to the others

round the table and a murmured 'All's well!'

In a flutter of anxiety Madame Baron watched her husband's face, but he never seemed to notice anything odd in Elie's conduct.

All of them did their best to avoid being buttonholed by Elie on their way through the hall, or at the kitchen door — but there was no escaping him. Time and again Madame Baron begged him to remain in his room and keep the door shut.

'But I'd so much rather be with you!' he would reply.

And she never could summon up the courage to tell him frankly that his presence made her feel uncomfortable.

It had the same effect on everyone in the house, with the exception of Baron, who still had no suspicion of any kind. The others, when they wanted to discuss the situation, were reduced to taking refuge in the attics or on the first-floor landing. Even so, Elie, who had sharp ears, would say the moment they came down:

'Been talking about me, haven't you?'

'Don't be silly! Do you imagine we've nothing else to talk about?'

'I'm certain that was it. But you've no reason to feel anxious. In a few days' time they'll have forgotten all about me, and I shall make a move. And, of course, once I'm back at home, I'll send you all nice souvenirs.'

He seemed to have completely forgotten that humiliating scene in the bedroom, his abasement, his tears. It was as if he'd never gone down on his knees to Antoinette, never sobbed and whimpered for his mother, never implored Madame Baron to forgive him, his face so livid that she thought he was going to have a fit. Never could she forget the way he had beaten his head against the wall, nor how he'd sprawled on the floor, jerking his limbs like an epileptic.

Somehow or other he had blotted all that out of his memory, had resumed his place in the household as if nothing had happened. True, his board and lodging were unpaid, as the banknote was burnt, but he was lavish of promises of the presents he would send once he was back in Turkey.

'Before I leave I'll show you how to make Turkish coffee, and once I'm back I'll send you a real Turkish coffee-set in burnished copper.'

There were moments when Madame Baron felt like going on her knees to him and begging him to keep silent. She could not even have a minute's quiet talk with her daughter. No sooner had they settled down together in the kitchen than the door opened, and there he was! In fact, he seemed to regard the kitchen as his domain, and fifty times a day walked the length of the hall between his bedroom and the glazed door. It was he who replenished the coffee-pot with boiling water from the kettle; and he who, when Madame Baron was busy in the bedrooms, prodded the potatoes with a fork to see if they were cooked enough.

'It's no trouble, I assure you. It gives me something to do.'

He rarely spoke to Moise, and never said a word to Domb, who, the moment he had finished eating, went up to his room.

'Really,' Madame Baron sighed, 'he might have asked me for a biscuit-tin and had bread and butter for his supper like the others. Don't you agree, Monsieur Moise? As it is, I have to cook a hot dinner every evening, just for him!'

'Why not tell him that you won't go on doing it?'

'Somehow I don't like to. Silly of me, I know, but there it is! And, of course, it would be awkward because of my husband. He'd start asking questions ...'

To crown all, since the cold snap had set in Elie had taken to wearing a frogged smoking-jacket in purple velvet from morn till night. He had explained in detail how he had had it made for him in Budapest by Admiral Horthv's tailor, and obviously fancied himself in it, striking the poses of a Brummel.

The worst day of all was a Tuesday. Baron was on duty on a day train and didn't come home till seven in the evening. On the previous day Elie had already scented something in the wind, and when, on the Tuesday morning, he saw Madame Baron come back from her marketing with a large bunch of flowers, his curiosity became acute. So he laid an ambush – in other words, he left his bedroom door open and stayed lurking in the background. Valesco would be bound to pass the door sooner or later.

'Hullo, old chap!' Elie shouted to him 'Step in for a moment, will you?'

'Sorry, I'm in a hurry.'

'I only want a word with you. What's happening here today?'

Valesco would have preferred to hold his peace, but he owed Elie three hundred francs, and saw no prospect of repaying them in the near future.

'Oh, it's Monsieur Baron's birthday.'

'So that's it. Look here! Will you do me a small service? I don't feel like going out myself. Would you mind going to the best florist's in the town and buying a bouquet? A really posh one, don't you know? A hundred francs should be enough. Wait! I must give a present too. Let's see. ... I don't think he has a fountain-pen. Will you please buy one? Choose one of the best makes, please. Here's three hundred francs for the lot.'

That morning there were frost-flowers on the panes and the Rumanian's face was blurred almost out of

recognition when Elie, watching from his window, saw him crossing to the tram-stop

A subtle, well-pleased smile lingered on Elie's lips when, after donning his gorgeous smoking-jacket, he entered the kitchen, where Madame Baron was engaged in trussing two fowls. There was a knock at the hall door. It was the baker's boy delivering two fruit tarts.

'Do please go back to your room, Monsieur Elie. Really you'll make me quite annoyed if you stay in the kitchen.'

And for once he complied with her request.

At noon Baron was still away. The midday meal was rushed through, Madame Baron and Antoinette were both in their best clothes, ready to go out immediately it ended.

Was it that Elie found they weren't taking enough notice of him, and he resented being eclipsed by the domestic anniversary? Anyhow, as the meal was ending, he thought fit to say, rather loudly, to Valesco, who was seated beside him:

'Do you know, I've just thought of something rather interesting?' They were talking in the papers of the difference between French and Belgian law. Well, suppose someone who's being proceeded against in Belgium by the French police commits a crime in Brussels, or some other Belgian town. ?'

He paused, the only sound to fill the silence was the clatter of knives and forks on plates – and for some reason it had a sinister effect, like the sound of a distant tocsin.

'You don't follow? What I mean is, that a man who's liable to the death-penalty in France might happen to commit a crime in Belgium. In that case, it seems to follow that he should first be tried in Belgium, if it's in that country he's arrested. And it also follows, doesn't

it, that he would serve his sentence in this country?’

His face was pale. His lips had an odd twist – but at a stretch it might have passed for a smile. And he looked genuinely pleased when he saw that Antoinette was smiling.

Moise straightened his back and looked him in the face.

‘Would you be good enough to change the subject?’

He didn’t dare to persist, and turned his eyes away, but there was still a flicker of some curious emotion in the pupils.

The table was cleared more quickly than usual. Domb was the first to leave, then Valesco went to his bedroom. Madame Baron was starting to go up the stairs when Moise, putting on his student’s cap, walked past her on his way to the front door.

‘Monsieur Moise!’ she called.

‘Yes? All right, I’m coming.’

They talked in whispers on the landing, and Elie, left to himself in the kitchen, strained his ears in vain to catch what was being said. A minute later he knew. There was little that escaped him. No sooner had Madame Baron and her daughter left the house than Moise, instead of settling to work in his room, brought his manuals and exercise-books to the kitchen.

Without a word he seated himself in the armchair, Elie’s usual place when Baron was out, and started jotting down rows of figures.

Elie put some coal on the fire, poked it noisily, then drew up a chair beside it. Smiling, he said:

‘You’ve been told to keep an eye on me. Are they afraid I may steal something?’

Moise pretended not to hear.

‘I’m not so dense as I may seem; I know you want to see the last of me. But you won’t have to wait much

longer. Once the police have lost interest in me I'll be off – and you can have your harem to yourself!

The Polish Jew slowly raised his head. There was no trace of anger in the pale, staring eyes – and this made what followed all the more impressive.

'If you don't keep your dirty mouth shut,' he said, 'I'll bash your face in!'

Though smaller than Elie, he was more toughly built, and looked quite capable of putting the threat into execution. After he had spoken, the pencil could be heard biting into the paper, and the table started vibrating again.

Some minutes passed, and presently, for all his imperturbability, Moise looked up, puzzled by the long silence. He saw Elie sitting perfectly still, his eyes fixed on the red glow of the open ring of the fire; his underlip was sagging, quivering.

Moise resumed his work, and after a while, without a sound, almost, it seemed, without the least displacement of the air, Elie rose and walked out of the kitchen. The fire in his bedroom had gone out, but none the less he stayed there, sitting in front of the window.

Towards four, when the lamp-lighter was going his rounds, he saw two dim figures moving by, which he recognized as Antoinette and her mother. He heard the key turn in the lock, then footsteps in the hall. The two women had almost reached the kitchen door when there was a slight rattle of the letter-box; the evening paper had just been delivered.

Elie ran out and took it; then followed the women into the kitchen, where he found Moise gathering up his books and papers. The table was strewn with parcels of various shapes and sizes.

'Go upstairs and change your things,' said Madame Baron to her daughter.

Before even taking off her hat she went to the range, added a shovelful of coal, and set the kettle on to boil. Her cheeks were blue with cold; hundreds of ice glittered on her fur stole.

'Has no one been, Monsieur Moise?'²

'No one.'

Without a glance at Elie she went upstairs to change her clothes, and a moment later Moise went up too. The wicker chair creaked as Elie settled into it. The pages of the newspaper rustled. There was nothing of interest on the first or second page. But on the third he found a short paragraph headed. '*The Murder on the Paris Express*'

There were only a dozen lines or so – which seemed to indicate that Press and public had lost interest in the case.

'The police authorities are continuing their investigation of this daring crime. Four days ago a cabaret dancer, Sylvie B, now residing in Brussels, was questioned, and she was able to furnish some useful information. It is now known that the murderer is a Turkish subject, named Elias Nagear, and that this young woman was his mistress. So far, however, all efforts to trace him have been unavailing. The police theory is that Nagear crossed the frontier into Germany before the crime was discovered. The young woman, Sylvie B, has been admitted to bail.'

Quite calmly Elie tore off this portion of the page and laid it on the table. His eyes were sparkling. He lit a cigarette and took long, luxurious puffs at it. As he did so, he listened to the noises in the house with growing impatience. The moment Madame Baron appeared in the doorway, her hands behind her back as she knotted her

apron-strings, he jumped up and almost shouted at her: 'Well? What did I tell you?'

His voice was shrill with triumph. He thrust the piece he had torn from the paper into her hand

'Read this.' And he couldn't help chuckling 'So they're looking for me now in Germany! Isn't it priceless!'

She ran her eyes over the article and, without thinking, handed it back to him; after which, though there was no need to do so, she poked the fire vigorously

'So it's only a matter of a few days, and then, as I told you, I shall . . .'

'Oh, keep quiet!' she exclaimed irritably. That reference to her daughter as the young man's 'mistress' was rankling in her mind.

'But it's such good news!' he insisted 'Now that they're looking for me in another country ...'

'For heaven's sake shut your mouth! And go back to your room. I don't want you here.'

'Oh, if you take it that way. . .'

Tears were streaming down her cheeks as she went about her cooking. But she wept silently, after the manner of women no longer young. 'The young woman was his mistress!' What would the neighbours think? — for they were sure to guess that 'Sylvie B' stood for Sylvie Baron. And what would her husband say when he found out?

Antoinette came in and stared at her mother in amazement.

'What's wrong, Ma?'

'Nothing. Give me the flour.'

'Has he been talking to you again?'

'No. Don't ask questions, please. My nerves are all to bits.'

'Will he have dinner with us tonight?'

‘I don’t see how we can prevent him ’

Antoinette began unpacking the parcels. There were two pairs of socks, a black silk tie dotted with small white flowers, a smaller oblong packet containing a narrow cardboard box.

‘He’ll be awfully pleased with this fountain-pen,’ Antoinette remarked ‘I wouldn’t mind having one like it for my birthday too.’

It had cost sixty francs, and was a rather shoddy imitation of a well-known American make. The gold nib was only fourteen carats.

‘Hand me the butter.’

Meanwhile Elie was reading again the article about himself. After he had got it by heart he folded up the slip of paper and thrust it into a pocket of his velvet smoking-jacket

Domb came back and tramped up to his room. Moise went out and jumped into a moving tram, but was back again half an hour later.

There were all sorts of noises in the kitchen, and a house was full of unusual smells. For once in a way everybody kept to his room. Elie, who had drawn his curtains, held them a few inches apart and kept peeping out every time he heard footsteps in the street.

He was the first to hear the tinkle of the bell of a delivery-boy’s tricycle as it halted outside, and he ran to the door, some small change in his hand.

It was the bouquet. He retreated to his room without having been seen from the kitchen and, after stripping the silverfoil off the stems, placed the flowers in his water-jug to keep them fresh. Valesco returned only a few minutes before seven. Elie, who had been on the watch, opened his door at once and took the little oblong package Valesco handed him.

‘It’s a first-rate make – the best I could find. A hundred

and sixty francs. If the nib doesn't suit, it can be changed.'

In the kitchen Madame Baron kept wiping her eyes with her apron. She wasn't actually shedding tears, but try as she might to prevent it, her eyes kept filling.

'He'll be here any moment now,' she said.

She picked up the flowers that were lying in the sink, shook off the water, and arranged them in two vases. This evening the table was laid with a red-and-white check table-cloth, which enhanced the festive aspect of the room. Antoinette had disposed the presents in a little pile beside Baron's plate.

'Hadrn't you better powder your face, Ma?'

'Does it show — that I've been crying?' Then she added rather sadly. 'Hasn't Sylvie sent him anything at all, not even a birthday-card?'

Elie watched the tram come to a stop. The windows were misted over and the body of the vehicle hid the people getting down from it. When it started again, with the usual clanging of its bell, he saw Baron crossing the street.

The rattle of a latch-key. Heavy footsteps in the hall. Holding his door ajar, Elie heard Antoinette say:

'Happy returns, Pa.'

There followed a sound of kisses, a confused murmur of voices. Upstairs, too, on the dark landings, the young men were leaning over the banisters, listening to the noises on the ground floor.

Elie was the first to enter the kitchen, his huge bouquet in one hand, the tiny package in the other.

'Monsieur Baron, please accept my wishes for many happy returns of the day.'

The bouquet was far too grandiose for the humble little kitchen, and, grasping it awkwardly between his stubby fingers, Baron gazed at it with stupefaction. At last he stammered out some words:

'Really, Monsieur Elie, I don't know what came over you! It's much too fine for the likes of me.'

He turned the small packet over in his hands, at a loss what to say or do. Then, lumbering up to Elie, he kissed him, once on each cheek - or, rather, brushed it with his bristly moustache.

'Well, I must say, I never expected ...'

Madame Baron went into the hall.

'Monsieur Moise! Monsieur Domb! Monsieur Valesco! Dinner's waiting.'

The socks were unpacked, and duly approved; and then the necktie. But when Baron undid Elie's packet he went into transports of delight.

'Why, it's a "Parker"! A real one, not the imitation!'

While Elie beamed, Antoinette, looking thoroughly unhappy, reached towards the other fountain-pen, which was still in its wrappings. But her father noticed the gesture.

'What are you up to, you little rogue?'

He was in high good-humour. But when he opened the box and saw the other pen, the sixty-franc one, his face fell for a moment, and he didn't know what to say. Pulling himself together, he remarked cheerfully:

'Well, well, it never rains but it pours, as they say, and if I lose Monsieur Elie's ...'

Madame Baron was busy with her saucepans. Clicking his heels punctiliously, Domb bowed to the company, then handed Baron a horse-shoe tiepin.

'I wish you a very happy birthday,' he said gravely, 'and many more to come. And may I take this opportunity of assuring you that I shall never forget the hospitality I have enjoyed under this roof?'

Valesco hurried in, and presented Baron with a briar pipe.

For some reason Baron did not give them the accolade

He hadn't meant it humorously, and was quite startled when Antoinette went into peals of laughter, so violent that she seemed on the point of choking. She rose abruptly and, turning her back on the others, spat out what she had in her mouth into her napkin. She was still laughing when she returned to her place, her lips twisting in queer grimaces, tears welling in her eyes.

Elie went on quite calmly.

'Yes, it sounds unlikely, doesn't it, but I can give you actual instances. Before the Great War my father had once been the guest of a Russian nobleman. After the Revolution the Russian came to Constantinople, as Istanbul was then called. Well, he stayed five years under our roof.'

Antoinette was becoming hysterical; it was impossible to say if she were laughing or crying, and her father turned on her severely.

'Really now! How dare you behave like that when Monsieur Elie's talking? ... Please continue, Monsieur Elie.'

'That's the sort of thing you westerners can never understand. My mother and sister have hardly any money left, but if someone came to see them and mentioned he was a friend of mine, they ...'

'Antoinette!' said Baron sharply. 'If it wasn't my birthday, I'd pack you off to bed.'

His wife snorted angrily. 'I'd like to see you try it!'

Never had his wife talked to him in that tone before – anyhow in public. He blushed to the tips of his ears and started shovelling food into his mouth, hardly conscious of what he was doing. ...

As usual, Domb was the first to get up and go.

'Them Poles are a stuck-up lot,' Baron remarked as the door closed behind him. 'Not a bit like the Turks. They seem to think they're doing you a favour every

time they wish you "Good morning". Another thing I don't like in them is their way of treating Jews, even the Jews of their own country. When all's said and done, isn't Monsieur Moise just as much a Pole as he?"

He gazed at Moise, who, however, kept his mouth firmly shut.

'Where's your ma got to?' he asked Antoinette.

She went out and found Madame Baron sobbing to herself at the foot of the stairs.

'Don't bother about me,' she snuffled. 'I'll be all right presently. Tell them I'm coming back in a minute.'

Antoinette could restrain herself no longer.

'Listen, Ma! He's got to go. If he doesn't leave the house I won't stay here a day longer. . . Did you read that bit about him in the paper?'

'So he showed it to you too?'

'Yes. He called me down on purpose. Wasn't it awful what they said about Sylvie's being his .. his "mistress"?''

When they returned to the kitchen Moise was just leaving, and Valesco waiting for a pretext to follow suit. Baron had taken a bottle of the Luxembourg liqueur from the cupboard, and Elie had moved to the empty place beside him.

'Here's luck! And here's the best to Turkey!'

'The best to Belgium!'

'Oh dear! Pa's been drinking!' Antoinette whispered to her mother.

They cleared the table while the two men continued their potations. Elie was very flushed, and Baron in a state of noisy animation that his wife knew only too well.

'How did you know I specially wanted a "Parker"?''

'Oh, a little bird told me. . . '

They roared with laughter. There was a constant clatter of plates and dishes in the background, and

presently Madame Baron poked the fire for the last time, saying to Antoinette.

'Go to bed now. We'll finish washing-up tomorrow.'

Planting herself in front of the range, her arms akimbo, she eyed the two men disapprovingly.

'Another glass, Monsieur Elie? Yes, yes, I insist. It isn't my birthday every day.'

'What a good friend you are to me, Monsieur Baron! Do you know, I took a liking to you the very first day we met. To your wife too. But that's not the same thing. It's never quite the same thing with women, is it — or isn't it? There's no friend like a man friend, what?'

Vaguely conscious of Madame Baron's gaze intent on him, he made an effort to sober up, but without avail.

'And when you wish't us in Turkey, old boy ...' he began thickly.

And Baron, who was almost getting to believe it, cut in cheerfully:

'Yes, yes. I dare say, one of these days ...'

x

VALESCO had the habit of hanging his shaving-mirror on the hasp of the window for his morning shave. On this particular morning the sight of the children lining up at the school gate, and of an old fellow, who daily caught the 85 tram, waiting at the stop, told him the exact hour. Otherwise the street was almost empty, and the few passers-by were preceded by little blobs of mist formed by their breath.

When, after finishing his left cheek, Valesco was starting on his right, he noticed three men alighting from the tram and scanning the house numbers. One of them was fat, and his unbuttoned overcoat displayed a gold watch-chain looped across his waistcoat. He wore his

hat well back on his head and was smoking a big briar pipe.

One could tell he was the man in command, and when he spotted No 53 he indicated it to the others with an upward nudge of his chin and a long stare, in the course of which he observed Valesco at the first-floor window. But the lace curtain prevented him from seeing more than the dim outline of a man's body.

After that he said something to the smaller of his two companions, a middle-aged man with a drooping moustache, who seemed to feel the cold, as he kept both hands thrust deep into the pockets of his tightly buttoned overcoat. After that the small man started pacing up and down outside the grocer's, while the other two came across the road.

Valesco waited to hear the doorbell ring, for he felt convinced that these two men were coming to No 53. But there was no ring, and bringing his face closer to the window he saw them going round to the back of the row of houses, presumably to make sure there was no exit there.

When they returned their shoes were white with hoarfrost – which showed they had been walking in the rank grass of the field behind the house.

Another confabulation followed. The little man looked so perished with cold that Valesco felt quite sorry for him. The fat man, after a moment's indecision, turned into the grocer's, and remained there a good five minutes. After he came out the grocer's wife could be seen peeping excitedly from her window in the direction of No 53. Valesco decided it was time to take action.

He went out on to the landing and shouted: 'Madame Baron!'

'What do you want? Hot water?'

'No. I want you to come up and see something.'

But, as ill luck would have it, when he went back to the window, followed by Madame Baron, the fat man was already shaking hands with the small one, after which, looking pleased with himself, he moved off in the direction of the town. The third man walked slowly across the road.

‘Why did you call me?’

‘You saw those men, didn’t you?’

‘Yes – what about them?’

‘They’re police officers, I’d swear to it. They’ve interviewed the grocer, and that little chap keeps watching the house all the time. And I’m pretty sure the third man has gone to the back, and is keeping watch there too. The big fellow who’s just gone must be a Superintendent.’

Madame Baron stayed some minutes peeping from under the cover of the curtain. Two trams stopped at the halt, but the little man didn’t budge.

Valesco pointed downwards

‘Is he up?’

‘No. He sat up with my husband, drinking, till three in the morning, and he’s sleeping it off.’

There were heavy footsteps on the stairs, Domb was going out. Madame Baron asked anxiously

‘Don’t you think we ought to tell him?’

‘What’s the good? He loathes Elie, anyhow.’

The street-door opened and footsteps rang receding on the frozen pavement. The little man whipped out a notebook, looked hard at something in it, then hurried along on the other side of the road, parallel with Domb, staring hard at him.

‘What did I tell you?’

He went only a hundred yards or so; then, reassured, no doubt, retraced his steps to the iron pillar that marked the tram-stop.

'Now, Madame Baron, if you'll kindly leave me for a moment, I'll finish dressing.'

Madame Baron found Antoinette in the kitchen, having her breakfast, and her first idea was to say nothing. Nor did her daughter make any remark, but there was a questioning look in her eyes — which gave the impression of having grown much bigger during the last few days.

'I think today will see the end of it,' said Madame Baron with a sigh, as she took her vegetable basket from the cupboard. 'And I must say I shan't be sorry. ... Is Pa still asleep?'

Antoinette nodded.

'I'd like it to be all over before he comes downstairs. There's a policeman watching in front of the house, and another at the back.'

The girl's face grew rigid and she seemed unable to swallow the piece of bread she had just put in her mouth.

'I wonder,' her mother continued, 'if we should warn him?' When I went to see him just now he was sleeping like a log. You could tell he'd had a drop too much last night. He was lying face downwards, and snoring hard.'

After taking thought for a moment, she tiptoed up the stairs and tapped at the door of Moise's room. He opened at once. His hair unbrushed, the collar of his overcoat turned up, he had already started his day's work.

'Don't make a noise.' She pointed to the wall between his room and the one where her husband was sleeping. Then she opened the window in the roof, but the eaves made it impossible to see down the street. 'No, you'll have to come downstairs,' she murmured.

Moise followed her obediently. On the first-floor landing she turned into Valesco's room. He had finished dressing and was back at his observation-post at the window.

'Is he still there?'

Instinctively they spoke in hushed tones, like people in a house of mourning. Madame Baron pointed to the man in the black overcoat, who was stamping his feet to keep them warm, his eyes still fixed on the house.

'That's a policeman. There's another at the back.'

Moise avoided uttering Elie's name.

'Does *he* know?' he whispered.

'No. He's asleep. He was so tight last night that he went to bed with his shoes on.'

Antoinette had joined them, and was watching the plain-clothes man from the other window. The deeper he thrust his hands into his overcoat, the more his shoulders seemed to shrink together.

'We'd better not hang round the windows,' Madame Baron said. 'Come along, Antoinette.'

Moise went out first.

'You'll keep your eye on him, Monsieur Valesco, won't you?' Madame Baron said over her shoulder, and the young man nodded.

In the kitchen she poured out a cup of coffee and handed it to Moise.

'Drink it while it's hot .. Now tell me, what would you do in my place?'

Surprisingly enough, no one seemed in the least excited. But there was something sinister about their calmness that recalled to Madame Baron that day of evil memory when a German advance-guard entered Charleval and some twenty neighbours had gathered in the Barons' cellar. Then, too, there had been the same impression of helplessness, of being at the mercy of events, and now and again one of them would go to the narrow, grated window, flush with the pavement, and watch a troop of cavalry clattering down the street.

'Really it's my husband I'm most concerned about.'

There's no knowing how he'll take it, if he finds out all of a sudden like ..'

'What time does he go on duty?' Antoinette asked.

'Not till three I only hope he'll go on sleeping. ... Monsieur Moise, don't you think someone ought to warn him - Monsieur Elie, I mean? I don't feel up to it myself. When I think that it's perhaps the last time in his life he's had a proper bed to sleep in . . '

'Are you quite sure that man in the street is a policeman?'

'Monsieur Valesco says he is.'

Moise felt in his pockets, then blushed and asked :

'Can I have a franc, please?'

A moment later he went out, leaving the door 'to' - as Madame Baron termed it, that is to say, without letting the latch quite home. Valesco, from his vantage-point, saw him hurry across the road and noticed that the man in the overcoat gave a start and fished out his note-book at once.

Moise entered the grocer's, but, by straining his eyes, Valesco could still just make him out behind the dingy panes. He stayed there several minutes, during which the man in the overcoat studied his note-book.

Valesco hurried down to hear the news when he saw Moise running back across the street.

'He's a policeman, right enough. The big one, who's gone, asked if you'd had a new lodger for the last fortnight or so. The grocer's wife said she couldn't be sure, but it was quite likely, as she'd seen a light in the ground-floor room.'

'Have a cup of coffee, Monsieur Valesco. Antoinette, go and get a bottle of rum. It'll do us all good, a drink of something strong.'

It was a sunny morning and there were patches of moisture on the white walls of the back-yard. But the

block of ice like a cannon-ball – from Moise's split jug – was still practically intact

'I'll go and see if he's woke up'

Madame Baron walked boldly into Elie's room, and stood beside the bed. He was sound asleep, the sheets and blankets tossed back in disorder. A stale smell of drink hovered in the air, mingling with fumes from the stove and the pungent odour of warm linoleum. Still in a drunken stupor, he was evidently quite unconscious of her presence.

'Well?' Antoinette asked when her mother came back to the kitchen.

'Oh, he's asleep. Somehow I couldn't bring myself ... But really he ought to be told. Monsieur Moise, won't you do it – just to please me?'

Moise kept silent. Valesco prudently slipped out of the kitchen, for he had no wish to be saddled with this unpleasant task, and returned to his post behind the curtain.

The street was still almost empty. Sometimes a tram went by, bathed in sunlight, but with its windows frosted over. The distant stridence of a tin trumpet could be heard down on the left, the vegetable-man was going his round. The police officer had lit a pipe, and smoke was mingling with the white cloud of his breath.

The air was calm and clear, and the least sound evoked an echo, as on the fringes of a mountain lake. A rumbling high in air announced the passage of a train of skips on the aerial trackway. A little locomotive, too, could be heard puffing and blowing on a colliery siding, and emitting a high-pitched whistle every time it made a move.

The plain-clothes man, it seemed, was waiting for someone or something, for he now kept throwing glances in the direction of the town. Madame Baron set to peel-

ing potatoes, while Antoinette, forgetting for once to tidy up the bedrooms, stood with her back to the range, hugging her knitted shawl round her breast. Suddenly she asked :

‘Are you quite sure there’s someone in the field behind?’

‘Well, Monsieur Valesco saw the other policeman going that way.’

‘Because, if there wasn’t, *he* could climb over the wall. And once he’d crossed the railway line ...’

The policeman had been at his post for over an hour, and Elie was still asleep. The sickly-sweet odour of hot rum pervaded the kitchen. Even Antoinette had had a tot

‘Take a glass upstairs to Monsieur Valesco,’ her mother said. ‘There’s no fire in his room, and it’s perishing by that window.’ Then she plucked at Moise’s sleeve. ‘For goodness’ sake say something! What do you think I ought to do? I’m all a bundle of nerves, really, but I have to hold myself in because of Antoinette.’ Her lips were quivering, she seemed on the brink of tears

Suddenly she gave a start, her cheeks grew pale.

‘Listen!’

A car had stopped outside. There was the sound of someone walking briskly up the steps, a rattle of the letter-box.

‘You go and open. I don’t feel up to it.’

The door opened just enough to let someone enter and to give a glimpse of a taxi drawn up outside, its windows flashing in the level light. There was a click of high heels on the tiles.

Sylvie burst into the kitchen, bringing with her a gust of icy air. Without even pausing to kiss her mother she asked excitedly :

‘Has *he* gone?’

Tactfully Moise had remained outside, in the hall, but Madame Baron called him in, perhaps because she feared being alone with her daughter. Sylvie unbuttoned her coat and poured herself out some rum, without troubling to fetch a clean glass

'So he's still here! Didn't Antoinette get my letter?'

'Don't talk so loud Your pa's upstairs'

From which she gathered that her father had been kept in the dark. But that was a side-issue, and she had no time to waste on it

'Anyhow, *they* haven't been here yet, have they?'

'There's been a policeman in front of the house all the morning, and another at the back.'

'Did they come from Brussels?'

'How can I know? The man in front hasn't moved once. Monsieur Valesco's keeping an eye on him, from his window.'

Sylvie ran up the stairs and entered the young man's room without knocking. He looked round and bowed to her hastily

'Is that him? That little fellow?'

'Yes. He's just taken the number of your taxi.'

Sylvie had told the taximan to wait, and he was now pacing up and down the pavement in front of the house.

Valesco asked: 'Have you come from Brussels?'

She walked out of the room without answering. All her movements were brisk. She passed her sister on the stairs without a word. Greatly impressed, Madame Baron watched her activities from the kitchen, and sighed:

'I wonder what she means to do?'

Moise said confidently:

'Oh, she knows what she's about, and she'll handle it much better than we should'

But everyone gave a start — Valesco as well as the two

in the kitchen – on hearing a familiar creak; Elie's door had just been opened. It closed again immediately, and nothing more could be heard.

Elie had moved in his sleep and was sheltering his eyes with his arm from the sunlight flooding in through the window.

'Get up at once!' Sylvie shook his arm vigorously.

He groaned, and shifted his position again. When at last he opened his eyes and saw the girl gazing down at him, he muttered :

'What on earth ..?'

His head was throbbing and he could remember nothing of the night before. There was a foul taste in his mouth, and he had an impression that his neck had gone stiff again. He stared vacantly at Sylvie.

'You got my message, didn't you?' she said. 'Well?'

There was a vicious edge to her voice; no compassion in her eyes. In a half-dream Elie watched the sunlight playing on her hair, rippling along the sleeve of her fur coat.

'Get up, damn it! Don't you realize they're after you, and they'll be here any minute?'

He leapt out of bed and landed on his feet with the agility of a monkey.

'What's that?' Suspicion flickered in his eyes.

'Don't play the fool! I tell you, the game's up. They're at the door.'

His face grew contorted with fury.

'Ah, so you betrayed me, did you?'

'Betrayed you, indeed! Stop play-acting and get your clothes on.'

He stared at her for a moment, then exclaimed :

'I've tumbled to it! It's just a trick of yours to get me out of this house. Very clever of you, but – nothing doing!'

Then he noticed the taxi drawn up outside, and he went to the window Sylvie pointed

'Do you see that fellow there, beside the tram-stop? He's a plain-clothes man.'

Even now Elie seemed only half convinced. He went to the basin, gargled and spat the water out. Never had his features looked so angular, his cheeks so pale and wasted.

'Yes,' he said bitterly, 'I understand it all now'

'Good! In that case, hurry up and get dressed'

'Yes,' he said again, 'and, what's more, I know why you gave me away. For money, of course. You'd do anything for money, wouldn't you?'

'Oh, stop that damned nonsense!'

'And I should have guessed that was your game when you tricked me into coming here'

She raised her arm to slap him, but he looked so frail and wretched in his dragged pyjamas that she let it fall again.

'Get dressed!'

'Don't you order me about! I'll do what I damn well please – and I warn you you'll regret it!' He watched Sylvie from the corner of an eye to see what effect his threat had had on her, but she had her back to him and was staring out of the window

On the previous evening she had been summoned to the headquarters of the Brussels Sûreté and confronted by three police officers. Two of them were smoking pipes. The detective who had questioned her at the cabaret was sitting on a corner of the table, beside a Belgian Police Superintendent. The third man, who kept pacing up and down the room, was a member of the Paris Sûreté.

'Take your seat, Mademoiselle. Now let's hear why you told us all those lies. ...'

She had found time to glance at the papers strewn on the table and to notice a letter headed *Station Café, Charleroi*

With an effort she conjured up a smile, an air of injured innocence.

'And wouldn't you have done the same thing in my place?' she asked breezily

The three men exchanged glances; then they too grinned, taken by her effrontery.

For three days Sylvie had been expecting this to happen. She knew the porter at the *Palace* had seen her taking away Elie's luggage; and not only the porter but the boots, who had helped to load it into the taxi. And as it's always the same taxis that use the rank outside a big hotel, there had been no difficulty in tracing the one she'd taken. The trail led to Charleroi, first to the Station Café, then to No 53 Rue du Laveu

'Is he still lodging with your parents?'

'I haven't a notion. And that's the Gospel truth.'

'Are you aware that we could arrest you for aiding and abetting?'

Her eyelids fluttered, she smiled again

'I acted as anyone in my place would have acted — that's all I have to say. By the way, I can assure you that my parents haven't the faintest notion who he is.'

That closed the proceedings. The three men exchanged glances once more, but could think of nothing more to ask. The only question was — should she or should she not be taken into custody? The French police officer shrugged his shoulders to show it was a matter of indifference to him.

'All right, you can go now. But hold yourself in readiness to appear whenever we require you.'

'Any objection to my going to Charleroi?'

The three men conferred.

‘No, you may go there if you want to’

It was eleven at night when Sylvie left Police Headquarters. She felt certain they were at this moment telephoning to the Charleroi police, telling them to keep watch on the house – if indeed they weren’t doing that already. She drove to the *Merryland* and had a whispered conversation with Jacqueline. After that she danced, stayed up well into the small hours drinking champagne with a ship-owner from Antwerp, and day was breaking when she changed her dress.

Now Elie was eyeing her with hatred and disgust. He saw her in profile, sunlight still playing on her hair, a fainter sheen on the tightly drawn silk stockings – stockings he had given her!

‘Get dressed!’ she repeated wearily.

Then she walked out of the room, closing the door behind her. In the kitchen her mother gave her a questioning look; then asked:

‘Well? What did he say?’

Antoinette’s eyes were fever-bright, her lips tight-set, and she gazed intently at her sister. But all that Sylvie, who was warming her hands at the fire, found to reply was

‘What did you expect him to say?’

Valesco entered and, without being asked, helped himself to rum. Again Madame Baron was reminded of those chaotic days of 1914, when all the conventions of ordinary life went by the board.

‘The cop’s still hanging about outside,’ the Rumanian informed them. ‘But his nose isn’t quite so red, as he’s in the sun now.’

He glanced at the clock, which pointed to half-past ten. Suddenly Madame Baron stopped peeling her potatoes and said to Antoinette:

'I'm so afraid your pa may wake up. Go and see if he's still asleep.'

Obediently Antoinette went to the door, and tiptoed up the stairs.

'Are you sure there isn't anything we can do...?' Madame Baron began tentatively, but refrained from looking at her daughter.

'No,' said Sylvie peremptorily. 'It's no use looking for trouble.'

'If it wasn't for that policeman at the back,' Valesco murmured. 'But they're taking no risks.'

Sometimes a faint sound from Elie's room made them cast nervous looks at each other.

'I know what I'd do in his place,' Valesco added.

Madame Baron looked him in the eyes.

'Yes? And *what* would you do?'

Valesco made the gesture of a man pointing a revolver at his forehead. Madame Baron shuddered and poured herself out some rum. None of them was conscious of drinking — but the bottle was half empty already. Antoinette came back.

'Pa asked me what the time was. I told him it was only eight, and he went to sleep again.'

Like her mother, she refrained from looking at Sylvie, who was the only one to seem quite unperturbed. Moise, however, kept stealing glances at her, after each of which he promptly turned away.

'Ssh! He's coming!'

A door creaked. Sunlight was pouring in through the narrow window over the front door, filling the hall with a luminous haze, through which Elie's spare form showed in dark relief. They saw him linger for a moment outside his door, then walk quietly towards the kitchen.

The only sound was a choking sob from Madame Baron.

They could hardly recognize the man who halted in the doorway, so changed he seemed. There was something terrifying in the preternatural calm that had descended on him. But the red-rimmed eyes were dark with scorn and hatred as they roved from one face to the other, and there was a bitter twist to his lips.

'Well? Are you satisfied – now?' he asked with a harsh laugh, and reached towards the bottle.

Never had the little kitchen seemed so cramped. They were huddled up together, afraid to meet each other's eyes. The sun had reached the block of ice in the yard, and Antoinette, who was nearest the window, could see it sparkling with broken lights.

Sylvie rounded on him.

'Keep your mouth shut!'

Beads of sweat glistened on Elie's upper lip and he had cut his chin, shaving. He had on the smart grey suit that he had worn on board the *Théophile-Gautier*.

He looked out into the yard and, tilting his head back, measured the height of the white wall, above which stretched a dazzling expanse of bright blue sky. Madame Baron started sobbing again, and moaned:

'Do speak, someone. ... Isn't there anything we can do?'

She couldn't bring herself to look at Elie. Moïse had turned away and was staring at the wall. Valesco made a hasty move, and ran up to his room.

'There's nothing to be done,' said Sylvie gravely. 'If there had been, I'd have done it.'

For some reason Elie had drawn closer to Antoinette, and she did not move away. He fixed his eyes on her and their expression was so strange that, when he made as if to lay his hand on her shoulder, the girl screamed and threw herself into her mother's arms.

Valesco came racing down the stairs.

'They're here!' he cried.

The engine of a car was throbbing outside the door. There was a clatter of footsteps on the pavement, a sound of voices. Elie swung round so quickly that everyone fell back in alarm, and just as the door-bell rang he dashed out and scrambled up the stairs.

'Oh dear!' wailed Madame Baron, clasping Antoinette to her breast. 'He'll wake your pa!'

Valesco remained in his room, and it was Sylvie who opened the door. Three dark forms could be seen outlined against the sunlight.

'So you got here first,' laughed one of the men. 'Not been up to any tricks, I hope?'

The detective who had interviewed her at the *Merryland* promptly opened the first door, saw the suitcases marked *E N* and, stooping, looked under the bed.

'Where is he?'

The French police officer was smoking a cigarette on the doorstep, and appeared to take no interest in the proceedings.

'Upstairs,' Sylvie replied.

They could see Madame Baron and Antoinette watching from the dimly lighted kitchen, and from their end the two women saw the Superintendent take a revolver from his pocket and load it.

'You go in front.' It was to Sylvie that the Superintendent spoke, and without the least hesitation she started up the stairs.

On the landing she halted and opened the doors of the bedrooms occupied by Domb and Valesco. Both were empty.

The little plain-clothes man in the street had approached the house, and he too was clutching a revolver concealed in his overcoat pocket.

'Don't be alarmed,' Valesco murmured, looking at Madame Baron.

She tried to smile, and went on stroking Antoinette's red hair. In an agony of suspense the girl was listening to the sounds upstairs

'Ssh! Don't speak!' she whispered.

By now Sylvie and the two men had reached the top floor. Suddenly there was a scream, followed by a series of crashes as if furniture were being thrown about, windows smashed.

A moment later came a sound of almost tranquil footsteps on the stairs. It was Sylvie coming back. She was very pale, and on entering the kitchen she walked straight to the window and pressed her forehead to the pane, which grew misted with her breath.

'What are they doing?'

The thuds were continuing, and now there were shouts as well.

'The last thing I saw of him' – Sylvie got the words out with an effort – 'he was sitting on the edge of the roof. He seemed to go quite crazy all of a sudden, and they had a dreadful fight, rolling about on the floor. He broke loose and climbed out of the window. They're trying to haul him back.' She turned on the tap, soaked her handkerchief in the ice-cold water and dabbed her face.

Suddenly Madame Baron screamed.

'Antoinette!'

Moise sprang forward just in time to catch the girl, who had fainted.

'Lay her flat on the table.'

In his haste Valesco upset the bottle of rum and knocked a tumbler on to the floor. No one had an idea what to do next, until Madame Baron said.

'Vinegar. ...'

But just then there was a noise on the stairs and she looked away from her daughter towards the hall. She had a glimpse of Elie's back, and didn't realize it was the handcuffs that made him walk so awkwardly.

'She's coming to,' said Moise, who was bending over Antoinette.

But Madame Baron had rushed out, followed by Sylvie, who was vainly trying to drag her back.

The three men halted in the hall. Madame Baron, who was standing a couple of yards from Elie, seemed incapable of making the least movement, or getting a word out.

Elie's face was badly knocked about, his hair plastered on his forehead, his nose bleeding profusely – but what impressed her most was the change that had come over his eyes. They kept moving restlessly from one object to another, and had a curious blank intensity that reminded her of the eyes of certain caged animals she had seen in the Zoo. In fact, one had the impression that he failed to recognize her, or any of the others.

'Do wait a moment,' she begged the police officers, 'he can't go out in that state,' and edged past them into the bedroom.

Her husband was standing half-way down the stairs, but she paid no heed to his look of horrified enquiry.

The Superintendent had got out his handkerchief and was staunching the flow of blood from a gash across his hand.

'Fetch his suitcases,' he said to the plain-clothes man, who had just come in.

Madame Baron returned with a damp towel and started wiping Elie's face. It all had taken no more than a few minutes, but already quite a crowd had collected outside. A small boy, perched on the railings, was peeping in at Elie's bedroom window.

Elie took Madame Baron's ministrations quite calmly, but blood kept oozing from the wounds as fast as she wiped it off

At last the Superintendent intervened, and gently thrust her aside. 'Let him be, Madame. He's not badly hurt.' To the men with him he added 'Get those people away. We don't want a crowd outside.'

A moment later they heard a gruff voice in the street 'Move on there! What are you hanging about for? There's nothing to see.'

Now and then Baron took a cautious step down the stairs, moving like a man in a dream. What was happening passed his comprehension. He had only a shirt and trousers on, and his slippered feet were bare.

'Move on! Didn't you hear what I said?'

Of his own accord Elie started walking towards the door. He had to stand back to let the inspector carrying his suitcases go out first. Sylvie's taxi and the police car were drawn up one behind the other.

'Shove him in!'

There was a shrill scream from the kitchen. Valesco, who was half-way down the hall, went no farther. Madame Baron stood beside him, the blood-stained towel in her hand, gazing towards the street.

After that events moved fast. The police officers and their prisoner crossed the zone of sunlight and vanished into the car. The Frenchman took the seat beside the driver. The door slammed and some of the people outside ran after the car as it moved off, for a last glimpse.

Sylvie, to whom nobody was paying much attention, gave her mother a perfunctory kiss and stepped into the taxi.

All was over, but people were still hanging round the house, and Madame Baron shut the door. She seemed utterly worn out, hardly able to drag herself along. Her

husband, as puzzled as ever, glanced into the empty bedroom and his eyes fell on the pink-stained water in the basin.

At last he got some words out .

‘What on earth has happened?’

Children were scrambling on to the window-sill; it was Moise who had the presence of mind to think of closing the shutters. Valesco was trying to forget about the money he still owed Elie

On the previous night Elie’s bouquet had been put in a pail and left in the scullery, to keep the flowers fresh. The water had frozen in the night, and they had to be thrown away.

XI

THE string of vehicles approaching La Rochelle was headed by a large open car, in which were the camera-men. Following it in single file came fifty-three cars, all police-vans, which had set out at dawn from the big convict prison at Fontevault.

It was a fine, warm autumn morning and the villages were bathed in sunlight. People came to their doorsteps to watch the grey, windowless vans, with armed warders posted beside the drivers, streaming past.

As the long procession slowed down on its way through La Rochelle the camera-men stood up in their car and took shots of it. Then came La Pallice, and the cars halted on the North Quay, to the right of the harbour, across which fishing-boats were gliding

The crowd was kept back by a police cordon, which only those with special permits were allowed to cross. So there were few except pressmen and photographers actually on the quay, where a tug was made fast in readiness to convey the prisoners to the Ile de Ré, the first stage of their journey to the convict settlement.

'Where are the star-turns?' one of the press-photographers asked a policeman posted at the gangway.

'The what? Oh yes, of course . . . Delpierre's in the second van, I think.'

Delpierre was a locksmith who had slaughtered his wife and his five children with an axe

'And Nagear?'

'Fourth or fifth van. You've seen his sister, haven't you? That's her, over there' He pointed to a tall girl in grey, who was standing in the front row of onlookers. The photographer ran across the open space towards her, but before he could level his camera she had hidden her face with her gloved hand.

Her neighbours in the crowd began to eye her with interest, and noticed that she was carrying field-glasses. The word was passed round that she was a relation of one of the prisoners.

The door of the first van opened. From each cell a man in ordinary clothes stepped out, hampered by shackles and handcuffs which constrained the movement of his arms. A kitbag on his shoulder, a loaf of black bread under his arm, he slowly walked between the rows of journalists and was led by a warder to the back of the boat. There he squatted on the deck, blinking at the glare off the water.

Most of the convicts were in rags and advanced timidly, as if afraid of making some blunder and being reprimanded, perhaps struck. Some, however, faced the pressmen with defiant eyes, a scornful curl of the lips.

'Look! That's him!'

Elie had on his grey suit, a black felt hat, and a well-cut mackintosh. He took no notice of the bystanders and concentrated his attention on the shackles, which made his movements curiously ungainly. To make things

worse, the big round loaf kept slipping from under his arm

Only when he was on board, seated on the deck between two fellow-convicts, did he look up and face the cameras pointed at him. Five hundred yards away a tall girl was feverishly trying to adjust the focus of her field-glasses.

'He's smiling!' a journalist remarked.

Was it really a smile? That furtive ripple of his lips might have meant almost anything. Then he turned to the grey-haired prisoner on his right and entered into conversation with him.

'Is that girl in grey really his sister?'

'Yes, and I'm told she's come all the way from Constantinople.'

None of those present could remember the departure of a shipload of convicts having taken place in such perfect weather. Though autumn was well advanced, it was like a summer's day, the sky serenely blue.

And, a week later, when the final embarkation was about to take place, the fine spell still persisted. Drenched in sunlight, the white-walled house of the Ile de Ré reminded one of well-washed sheets spread out to dry on a green meadow.

The curtain was rising on the second act. The convict-ship, *La Martinière*, was anchored in the offing, surrounded by a swarm of fishing-boats. All the rooms in all the hotels of the island were bespoken. In every café you could see newspapermen greeting each other; cameras lay on the billiard-tables.

'Many relatives turned up this time?'

'Yes, and there's a whole tribe of gypsies.'

The gypsies had tramped it all the way from the Mediterranean coast, to see off the patriarch of their clan. They had camped at the foot of the ramparts, and all day

Tong wild-looking women and children were to be seen prowling about the town, never addressing a word to anyone.

‘Nagear’s sister has come too.’

She had taken a room at the best hotel, and she too was to be seen walking on the sea-front at all hours. She was still in her grey tailor-made costume, and always wore gloves. She never talked to the other guests at the hotel and had her meals by herself, but on several occasions had been noticed conversing with members of the prison staff.

‘Most likely she’s trying to get some money through to him,’ someone observed.

That was so, and though constantly rebuffed, she kept on trying. She even appealed for help to one of the pressmen.

‘You’ll be in the front row, won’t you, when they’re marched on board? Do please slip this into his hand as he goes by.’

She couldn’t understand why they always refused, and her look conveyed what she thought of them. One morning she even buttonholed the governor of the Saint-Martin penitentiary, in the main street of the town. He took off his hat politely when she came up to him, but no sooner had she started to explain than, taking off his hat again, he walked away.

Even so she did not lose heart. She harried people with questions, as if they had nothing else to do than to give her information.

‘Tell me, please! Which road do they go down? Where are the public allowed to stand?’

She was told that windows overlooking the route taken by the prisoners could be rented, and she paid for one. But on learning that the venetian shutters had to be kept closed when the men were passing, she returned to the

house and insisted on having her money back

Two smartly dressed men who had been hovering in the background promptly came forward and rented the window she had given up. One of them, she learnt, was a brothel-keeper from Marseilles, the other the brother of a man under sentence of transportation

Everyone knew everybody else by sight, as they passed each other ten or a dozen times a day on the water-front. On the last morning, however, there was a new-comer – a woman in black who landed from the La Rochelle ferry-boat, and looked about her with a bewildered air

‘Is this where the convicts go on board?’ she asked the first person she met. ‘They haven’t embarked yet, have they?’

By way of luggage she had only a handbag, and she carried it about with her all the morning. When the clock struck twelve she seated herself on the sea-wall, opened the bag and took out some food.

Elie’s sister walked past her once or twice, and gave her a long look each time.

Meanwhile the prisoners were being lined up in the jail courtyard for the final roll-call. The prison buildings were built of the velvety grey stone so much used in this part of France, and the sky above them was a dome of pale, translucent blue

In an adjoining yard another parade was going on – of military police and warders, who were being given their final instructions for the voyage.

Meanwhile squads of police were barring the approaches to certain streets, refusing access to all who were not provided with police passes. Esther found herself held up by one of them.

‘But I tell you you *must* let me through,’ she almost shouted at the police officer in charge. Then, calming

down and pointing to a road bordered by tamarisk trees, she asked 'Will they come by that road?'

'Yes, Mademoiselle.'

She had noticed a garden surrounded by a low wall half-way up the road, and saw that, by turning up a side-street, she could approach it from behind.

On the stroke of one the great gate of the convict prison swung open, and the first to emerge were some prison officials in dark clothes. They were followed by a long procession, like a funeral *cortège*, moving slowly between two lines of civil policemen holding back the crowd.

The District Superintendent remarked to the Prefect of the *département*, who was walking at his side.

'I'm pretty sure those gypsies will put in an appearance. The whole tribe clubbed together to pay their fares here, so I'm told.'

Escorted by Senegalese infantrymen, the seven hundred convicts advanced at a slow funereal pace, as all were wearing clogs, many of them for the first time. Each man had a haversack on his back, a roll of bedding on his shoulder. Their civilian clothes had been taken from them and replaced by the convict garb of coarse brown serge, and they wore oddly-shaped black caps.

As they were approaching the low wall Esther's head bobbed up, her field-glasses trained on the front ranks.

'Sergeant! Get that woman to clear off!' said the Superintendent as he walked by.

The sergeant had only to give a glance, and the head ducked down again behind the wall. The Superintendent explained to the man beside him.

'That was the sister of that young chap Nagear. She wanted to slip some money through to him.'

'Nagear? Who's he?'

'He's the fellow who killed that Dutchman with a spanner on the Brussels express'

'Ah yes, I remember'

Cameras clicked. The crowd surged forward and were hustled back again. Just then, on catching sight of the man for whom they were watching, the gypsies set up a long shrill keening, a cry of desolation so intense that for a moment all seemed in abeyance, all movement arrested.

But then the steady tramp set in again, and soon they had reached the quay and the three tenders that were to take the prisoners on board *La Martinière*. Though as they passed along the gangways in single file all looked much alike, one of the press photographers managed to recognize Elie, who was plodding ahead with the same slow, mechanical steps, the same look of sullen resignation on his face, as his companions.

A woman in black was dodging to and fro behind the serried ranks of spectators, vainly trying to see over their shoulders, now and again plucking someone by the sleeve.

'Please would you tell me, are they passing now? Yes? I do wish you'd let me squeeze in — or couldn't I have your place just for a moment?'

She ran a little farther along the quayside, only to come up once more against a solid wall of bodies.

'Couldn't you let me have a peep? Just a little peep? ... Anyhow, you might tell me what they're doing. Are they going on board now?'

A group of young men brushed past her, with cameras under their arms. They had chartered a motor-launch so as to be able to accompany the tenders up to *La Martinière*. The motor-launch was alongside the quay, the engine turning over.

'Wait!' she called to them.

They stopped and stared at her, wondering who she was and what she wanted.

'I'm coming with you,' she panted.

'Very sorry, but we can't take passengers.'

But already she had dumped the handbag on the edge of the wharf and, stretching out her arms, was about to spring on to the boat. There was a five-foot drop between her and the deck.

'Stand back! You can't come with us.'

The boat was beginning to draw away. She sprang clumsily forward and fell into the arms of a young journalist, who looked terribly embarrassed.

'Hurry up!' someone said. 'There's no time to spare.'

'Oh, I've left my bag!' she gasped.

But there wasn't time to turn back for it. The tenders were casting off, and the camera-men wanted to be in front of them.

Troubled by the motion of the boat, the woman sat down.

'Do you know who any of them are?' she asked the man beside her, who was fitting a reel of film into his camera.

'Two or three.'

'I wonder if you happened to see a young fellow amongst them – brown hair he has, and looks like a boy of sixteen, though he's really much older?'

'What's his name?'

But to that she gave no answer. They were moving past the tenders and hundreds of convicts were looking down at the motor-launch speeding seawards.

'Have their clothes been taken away?'

'Yes – they've only numbers now to distinguish them.'

The skipper of the launch whispered in the ear of one of the pressmen:

'Better keep an eye on her. I expect she's a relation. Take care she doesn't do anything silly – throw herself

overboard, or something like that. There's been cases of that sort, you know.'

Word was passed round, and they took turns at sitting beside the elderly woman, who, however, showed no particular sign of emotion. One of them asked her:

'Is it one of the convicts you're interested in?'

She made a movement of her head, which might have been a nod.

'Perhaps we could help you. Is there anything you particularly want to know?'

'Do they have a very hard time out there? Can one send them comforts?'

The tenders had outpaced the motor-launch, which was now bobbing in their wake. Sunlight played on the streaming lines of foam. Some fishing-boats, too, were going out to sea, on the deck of one of them the crew could be seen having a meal and passing a bottle of red wine from mouth to mouth.

'Can't we get a bit closer?' the woman asked.

'Nothing doing, I'm afraid. Those tenders have the legs of us. But you'll have a good view of the prisoners when they're going up the Jacob's ladder.'

'Well I never! Have they to climb up a ladder?'

Her eyes were dry, and indeed she showed no signs of distress; and it was this strange calmness that alarmed the others. The skipper whispered to the man beside him.

'I once saw a woman jump overboard just when the convict-ship weighed anchor.'

As an extra precaution he detailed one of the crew to keep watch on their uninvited passenger.

'Why ever do they make them wear those horrid clothes?' she murmured. 'A proper shame I call it!'

One of the camera-men, noticing her accent, remarked:

'You're Belgian, aren't you? I didn't know there were any Belgians in this lot.'

But she still refused to let herself be drawn. She was wearing cotton gloves, shoes that were rather down at heel, and obviously home-made stockings.

'How'll you manage about your bag?'

'My bag? I haven't thought about it. Anyhow, I shall be starting back this evening.'

Evidently she was not concerned for the fate of the handbag. All the time her eyes were fixed on the tenders and the rows of heads showing above the rails, all in the same grotesquely shaped cloth caps.

'If only I had field-glasses!' she sighed.

One of the crew handed her a pair, but she didn't know how to focus them, and after some vain attempts she gave them back.

The convict-ship was looming up just ahead. A yacht glided past, with young men and women in white dresses lounging on the deck.

Someone said.

'Look! They're going on board now.'

One of the tenders had made fast alongside the steamer, and men could be seen climbing up the ladder. But when the motor-launch approached, a peremptory blast from the ship's siren warned them to stand off. The sailor on duty beside the woman held himself in readiness to pounce on her if she made the least move.

Crowded together on the deck of a small fishing-boat, the gypsies passed them. All were standing, craning their necks towards the convict-ship, shading their eyes with their hands.

The camera-men got busy.

'One more shot. Get as near as you can, skipper.'

The sailor asked.

'Have you spotted him?'

But she kept silent. She had seen nothing except a number of men who, in the distance, all looked exactly

the same, like a procession of black ants crawling up the ship's side. In her coat of dazzling white paint, bathed in sunlight, *La Martinière* might have been a luxurious steam-yacht, and the sea was dappled with silver glints.

'Let's go straight back to La Rochelle,' a camera-man said. 'I mustn't miss my train.'

For a good hour yet the convicts would go on streaming up the ladder, but it made a monotonous picture; a few dozen feet of film sufficed.

No more notice was taken of the woman in black, who remained seated on a hatch, a vague smile on her lips as she gazed across the sea. Only when they were making fast at La Rochelle and she went up to the skipper, opening a shabby black purse, did they notice her again.

'How much do I owe you?' she asked.

'Nothing at all. These gentlemen are paying for the trip.'

She murmured some words of thanks, then enquired:

'How does one get to the station?'

'Walk along the wharf a hundred yards, and you'll find it just in front of you.'

'Thank you. You're most kind. ...'

And Madame Baron went on smiling to herself, perhaps because it was such an exceptionally fine day. They had told her that calm weather would prevail in the Atlantic. 'Anyhow, that blanket looked nice and warm,' she reflected.

The train did not leave till nine in the evening, and it was now only six. She had plenty of time to look round the town, or, anyhow, to stroll about the station. But she did neither. She settled down in the third-class waiting-room, feeling a little ill at ease, perhaps because she hadn't her handbag with her. It had remained in the *Ile de Ré*. She bought a sandwich at the buffet, after first enquiring the price.

She did not notice Esther, who came back by the eight o'clock ferry and dined in the Refreshment Room.

The two women travelled in the same train, one in a second-class carriage, the other in a third. When the guard came round to check her ticket soon after the train had left, Madame Baron happened to mention that her husband also was a guard, on the Belgian Railways; and when the train stopped at Niort he moved her into an empty first.

ONE WAY OUT

—

I

JULIETTE crossed the street almost at a run, as she did every evening after leaving Bachelin, and, fumbling nervously in her bag for the latch-key, hurried up the steps.

As the door opened, a rectangle of light appeared, then narrowed, vanishing completely at the same moment as the girl's dark form.

The door was painted green, and had a notice fixed to it with drawing-pins announcing that the ground-floor flat was to let. It had been raining all the evening; Bachelin's waterproof was streaming and his hands were wet inside his pockets as, standing on the far side of the road, he kept his eyes fixed on the house.

It was the last house in the Rue Creuse. Its two lighted windows on the first floor, and a gas street-lamp, were the only lights visible in the dark rain-swept vista of the narrow street.

Bachelin pictured her starting up the staircase, her coat streaming like this, her lips bruised by his kisses, her music-case under her arm. And, as usual, he lingered in the deserted street for a last glimpse of her, a slim, dark silhouette moving behind the yellow curtains.

But tonight, when the door had only just closed and Juliette could have been no more than a few steps up the stairs, something unusual happened. The yellow curtains of the first-floor room parted, and the form of a small, thin man could be seen standing at the window. Slowly, deliberately, he raised a long, straight object he was

holding, so that the light from the ceiling-lamp behind fell full on it. It was a double-barrelled shot-gun

The man made no show of aiming it, or indeed any gesture. The gun was merely displayed — a token or a warning — and the sight was so unexpected, so grotesquely out of keeping with the staid, bourgeois background of the Grandvalets' drawing-room, that Bachelin lost his nerve completely, took to his heels and fled towards the centre of the town. Only when, surrounded by the lights and bustle of a busy street, he paused to take breath, did he realize he had been running. And then, his cheeks flushed, even his ears scarlet, he walked on again, taking long strides, cursing himself for his absurd alarm.

He'd let himself be bluffed into a panic by that ridiculous little man, Grandvalet, who must be chuckling heartily as he watched Juliette placing her music on the piano. Likely as not he was showing her the gun, pointing to the window and the dark street below.

'You should have seen the way he bolted! As if the devil were at his heels!'

The rain had worked through the seams of Bachelin's waterproof, and he was feeling feverish, hot and cold all over. His small, black pupils had contracted to pin-points, his long nose seemed more prominent than ever, his chin more peaked.

And as he walked stubbornly ahead, gritting his teeth, the objects in his field of vision seemed to lose their comforting solidity, to become blurred and fluent like reflexions in a troubled pool. The one clear picture present to his eyes was that of the green door and the notice '*Flat to Let*'. With the window above it, the shot-gun, and the small, spare figure of the man who held it, began a dream-world, in which M. Grandvalet cut the figure of a malignant gnome rather than that of the highly respect-

able head cashier in the *Crédit Lyonnais* he actually was.

What was it Juliette had said to him just now?

'We mustn't see each other any more. It upsets my poor father so terribly.'

And when she said this she was nestling in his arms, crushing herself to him! Their lips had only just drawn apart, their wet hair mingled, and each was conscious of the warmth of the other's body seeping through rain-drenched clothes.

What had he replied? Ah, yes. ... Frowning, his eyes fixed on the muddy pavement, he said emphatically:

'I'd rather shoot you and myself right away than give you up.'

Of course she hadn't really believed that, but all the same he had felt her hand tremble in his. Then he added:

'Yes, I swear I should do something desperate if anything or anyone came between us.'

And five minutes later he had taken to his heels at the mere sight of a shot-gun!

Though he was walking with long, decided steps as if bound on some important errand, actually he had no idea where he was going. He could feel his fever rising and, like a man who cannot leave an aching tooth in peace, kept on exasperating it, forcing it higher. Everything seemed growing bigger and bigger, and the people whom he passed many times life-size, and he pictured himself a giant striding along in seven-league boots. The familiar streets of Nevers, the Municipal Office in which he was employed, the long straight avenue leading to the station—all had taken on the semblance of a dream. He was moving in a world of shadows, whose eeriness was intensified by the liquid sheen of the pavements, the silvery shafts of rain, the broken lights that flickered on the windows, and the glistening mackintoshes of people hurrying past him.

At last he reached the *Café de la Paix*. Some of his friends were sitting round a table, playing cards. He halted for a moment in the doorway, his shoulders hunched, staring before him with unfocused eyes. The water streaming from his coat made a little pool round his feet. He heard a burst of laughter from the table where his friends were. ...

‘What’ll you have?’

‘A hot grog.’

‘What’s up? You look like nothing on earth! Been having a row with your girl?’

He had still the queer impression one gets in dreams, that, while some people and objects are enveloped in a sort of fog, others are almost painfully distinct.

The air was thick with cigarette-smoke, and there was a background of confused sounds—talk and laughter, and small tinkly noises, the rattle of dominoes on marble-topped tables. There were whole sentences spoken by his friends of which he failed to catch a single word.

In much the same way he could hardly see Dieudonné, who, however, was sitting immediately opposite him, and Berthold, a clerk at the *Crédit Lyonnais*. On the other hand, the pale face and narrow lips of Jacquemin the hunchback were as clean-cut as if they had been graved out with an etching-needle. Jacquemin was saying in a voice that burred like an old record:

‘I wouldn’t mind betting she’s soft on her music-master, like all the other silly fools of girls in Nevers.’

Bachelin didn’t flinch, though the words had struck home disagreeably.

Young Lasserre, whose father kept the radio shop, remarked sententiously:

‘Anyhow, it’s a mug’s game, letting a woman get one down.’

Bachelin took a gulp of the drink in front of him; the

pungent fumes of hot rum and lemon filled his nostrils. Noticing his reflexion in a mirror opposite him, he knitted his brows to emphasize the grimness of his face.

It was a young face, lean, with harshly cut features, small, deep-set eyes, an indeterminate complexion. The dingy-yellow hair, which he wore over-long, gave it an air of drab romanticism.

'Waiter! Another grog.'

The first glass had braced him up, but somehow the outside world seemed queerer still. In the mirror, close against his own face, he could see that of Olga, a young woman of the town who was now being kept by an elderly colonel. She spent her evenings in the café, always in a fur coat and seated at the same table, reading the papers, writing letters, and sometimes gazing dreamily in front of her.

Their eyes met, and Bachelin realized that this evening he was looking really impressive. The waiter brought his second grog, the hum of voices, the drone of the stove, the click of dominoes, merged in the smoke-bound air, and from outside came the brief whistle of a train entering the station.

Suddenly tears came to Bachelin's eyes. He had just thought of their doorway. For they had a doorway, Juliette and he, which they called 'theirs'. But before going to it he had always that nerve-racking wait opposite the music-teacher's house in the Rue des Ardilliers. When she stepped out she made a discreet sign, and he joined her after a short while in a quieter street. Immediately he started kissing her, again and again; then slipped his arm round her waist. Keeping close beside the walls, avoiding every lighted patch, they walked slowly towards 'their' doorway.

It was in the Rue Creuse, at a safe distance from the nearest street-lamp and fifty yards from where she lived.

There was a fairly deep porch, and passers-by could see no more than a darker blur within the shadows, where they stood locked in each other's arms

This evening the window immediately above the porch had opened, as it nearly always did – but this had ceased to trouble them. They had discovered that it was an old maid who always remained with her head outside the window, getting a vicarious thrill, as long as they were in the porch below. When they made a move she shut the window, muttering to herself.

'One day she'll lean too far out and crash on to the pavement,' Bachelin had chuckled. 'And a nice old mess there'll be!'

Just then Lasserre, who had had enough of the game, addressed him.

'Like to take my place?'

'No, thanks'

He continued observing himself in the mirror and watching Olga's face; she still had her eyes fixed on him. He had just finished his second grog, and he called for another

'Yes, drink's a good friend when a woman lets one down' The hunchback's face split in a large grin.

Juliette hadn't seemed heart-broken when, putting her arms round his neck to soothe him, she said:

'Listen, dear! We mustn't see each other any more – not for some time, anyhow. It upsets my poor father so terribly. He imagines all sorts of nasty things, and I can't make him understand. . .'

They were standing in the rain, drops of icy water trickling off Bachelin's hat on to the girl's cheeks. There was a childish earnestness in her tone; her eyes had their usual look of quiet gravity.

'Don't be angry,' she pleaded. 'Some day, perhaps, I

He had only the vaguest idea of what she had intended.

He had let his tongue run away with him, said the most absurd things, bullied and implored alternately. He'd even spoken of going to see M. Grandvalet then and there, demanding his consent to Juliette's marriage!

At which Juliette had smiled rather wistfully. That would be quite useless, her father'd never hear of it.

It was then he had threatened to do something desperate, scowling tragically at the night. And now again he felt over-tuned, tense with nervous energy, as a picture rose before him, not of Juliette, but of that damned gun! He was convinced that the mere look on his face showed that he was living through a crisis, for Olga never took her eyes off him.

'Four queens,' Dieudonné announced.

And Berthold of the *Crédit Lyonnais*, the bank in which M. Grandvalet was head cashier, murmured, as he sorted out his cards

'By the way, does the old boy know you're carrying on with his daughter?'

Bachelin saw red

'What the devil are you getting at?'

'Oh, I only wondered',

'What did you mean by asking me that question?'

'There's no need to fly off the handle. Only I happen to know that the old man's rather keen on his daughter marrying our sub-manager. And in any case they're a stuck-up lot, the Grandvalets, very proud of the family name, and all that.'

Bachelin didn't explode, but he did worse. He treasured up each phrase in his mind and let it rankle till his whole body was quivering with indignation. After some moments' silence Dieudonné remarked -

'Of course I didn't believe you when you told me he'd agreed to let you marry his daughter.'

'And you, were quite right not to believe me.' He

grinned, watching his face in the glass with satisfaction. An idea had just crossed his mind; he knew now exactly what he was going to do, something that would make these sneering fools sit up all right! And he swept the room with a lordly, condescending glance

'Waiter! A hot grog.' Inwardly he thought 'They imagine I'm tight, but I was never so clear-headed in my life. And they'll find that out tomorrow.'

It was just on eleven when the party broke up. They bade each other good night on the pavement outside the café, their hands thrust deep in their overcoat pockets. The town was asleep, and the only sign of life was at the corner of the Rue de Paris, where the yellow globe above a petrol-pump glowed like a Chinese lantern in the darkness.

'Think you can get home all right?' mumbled the hunchback. 'Shall I come with you?'

The remark sounded innocent enough, but Bachelin sensed the innuendo behind it. He lived in the slum quarter of the town, behind the Municipal Office. And it was common knowledge that his mother earned her living selling papers in the street.

'Thanks, I can look after myself,' he retorted.

He was staggering a little. Berthold walked off with Lasserre.

The patter of the rain sounded louder in the empty streets. Clocks were striking the hour. The hand of the big clock in the Town Hall tower moved forward with a little jerk every minute. . .

It was two when the wail of the Fire Brigade siren woke everybody with a start. For the next half-hour confused sounds could be heard from some point of the town which it was difficult to locate.

Then dawn came with a grey, rainy sky, as on the previous day, and newspaper-boys raced through the

streets, shouting 'Paris-Centre Special Edition.'

At the corner of the Rue Creuse the police had formed a cordon to keep away the public. In the bleak light the mayor and two police superintendents could be seen pacing up and down outside the house. Their faces were grave, and now and then, after a whispered conversation, they entered the house and stayed inside for a few minutes.

The green door with the notice *Flat to Let* was gone; or, rather, it lay, charred and battered, on the pavement.

M. Grandvalet was moving restlessly about, his hands behind his back, a black overcoat buttoned over his pyjamas, in the house next door, where he had been given shelter. His wife was lying on a bed that was not hers. Juliette had stopped crying at last. She had shed so many tears that her eyes were empty, her eyelids red and sore.

The remains of two petrol tins, twisted by the flames, had been found on the doorstep. At nine the owner of the garage in the Rue de Paris came to identify them.

'Yes, those are my tins. I sold them last night, at about midnight, to a young man in a yellow mackintosh.'

And by eleven it had all come out. Crushed, submissive as a child who has been soundly thrashed, Juliette had blurted out all that Bachelin had said at their last meeting. Very composed and dignified, M. Grandvalet had described his conduct with the shot-gun. And, finally, the waiter at the café had stated that, when leaving on the previous night, Bachelin had seemed to be in a highly excited state.

There was little difficulty in filling in the gaps. From eleven till midnight the young man had roamed the streets by himself, putting in a short appearance at a house of ill-fame near the Town Hall, and insisting on being served a grog. At midnight he had bought the tins

of petrol. His movements between midnight and two o'clock were less certain, but he had probably taken cover in one of the side-streets off the Rue Creuse. The fire might have started a little earlier, but it was only at two that smoke began to pour into the first-floor flat.

There had been a scene of wild confusion; the Grandvalets had scrambled out by one of the windows, the firemen had arrived and played their hose on the flames.

The crime aroused not only consternation but embarrassment. Indeed, people hardly liked to talk about it, as the reputation of a young girl was involved. The local paper declared it was unlikely that Bachelin had left Nevers — with the result that instinctively everybody kept looking out for the young man in the mackintosh in the streets and cafés.

The railway station and the roads leading out of the town were kept under observation. Police officers went from café to café, hotel to hotel, and searched the bedrooms of the brothels.

But when night fell nothing had come of all this activity. For once Dieudonné, Lasserre, and Berthold omitted to play cards, and all the time they were talking together excitedly. Olga, who was at her usual place two yards away, listened-in to their conversation.

On the following day a butcher reported that he had seen Bachelin on the Loire bank, but though a thorough search was made along the riverside, it led to nothing.

A new door had replaced the burnt one at the house where the Grandvalets lived, but, as it lacked a coat of paint, looked more like a hoarding. There were still black smoke-trails up the front of the house.

The Grandvalets, however, had returned to their flat; it was practically undamaged by the fire, which had been extinguished before it could spread to the first floor.

'It is a mystery where this misguided young man, who has no friends, can have found shelter' Thus the local paper

At eleven on the following night a dressmaker made a report at the police station that a few minutes before, when she was coming home from the pictures, a young man in a mackintosh had grabbed her bag and made off with it. There were three hundred-franc notes and some small change in the bag

Spick and span as ever, his hands and nails immaculately clean, his grey hair smoothly brushed M. Grandvalet was back on his stool at the pay-desk of the bank. He had adopted a grave, slightly afflicted but quite dignified demeanour, that was the admiration of all the townsfolk.

'It is believed that Bachelin slept last night in an empty truck in the goods yard.'

This appeared a week after the crime had been committed, and thereafter nothing more transpired. Bachelin's mother, known to all the town as 'Augustine', came as usual every morning to the *Paris-Centre* office, to get her bundle of papers fresh from the press. She drank neither more nor less than usual, and when her son's name was mentioned, scowled and said in a nettled tone:

'I don't want to hear no more of that rapsallion.'

Juliette had resumed her piano-lessons, but for safety's sake her mother escorted her to the Rue des Ardilliers, waiting for her in the music-master's kitchen, as there was no other room available. When they were together in the street they walked at a quick pace; or, rather, Mme Grandvalet dragged her daughter along as if they were being pursued.

A sharp frost set in at the beginning of December.

The Loire was full of drift-ice and there were fears for the safety of the bridge. Every morning numbers of people went to the river-bank to see if anything had happened to it overnight. The local paper had photographs of down-and-outs in Paris huddled round braziers in the streets and under the arches of the Seine bridges.

Over two months had passed since the Fire Brigade was summoned to the Rue Creuse. Rows of ducks and woodcock had made their appearance in the poulterers' windows.

Then one day Philippe Grandvalet, Juliette's brother, who was married and living in Paris, wrote to his father.

'I may be mistaken, but I feel pretty sure I saw a certain young rascal (you know who I mean) at the Place Clichy yesterday. The only thing that prevents my being positive is that this young man had a beard. In any case, he gave me a hard stare and, if it was the man we have in mind, must have recognized me.'

It was Bachelin sure enough, though he had changed considerably since leaving Nevers. Not only had he let his beard grow, a reddish-brown beard trimmed in the form of a blunted wedge, but he had become much thinner. The fixity of his gaze was even more pronounced, and he seemed jumpier, more highly strung than ever.

At one in the morning of December 28 he was seated in the corner of a small bar in the Boulevard Rochechouart. He had had a coffee, and, the empty cup before him, was staring at his reflexion in the glass behind the bar.

The door opened, but he paid no particular attention to the man who entered, and whom the barman addressed as 'Monsieur Lucien'.

'A café au lait and rolls, eh?'

M Lucien nodded. He was about Bachelin's age, and he too had dark-ringed eyes and cavernous cheeks, but under the shabby overcoat a well-cut dinner-jacket could be seen.

'How's your turn doing?' the barman asked.

The young man was dipping his rolls in the coffee and eating rapidly, holding his head forward so as not to splash his shirt-front.

'Not so well, the weather's too cold.'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'Oh, it's quite simple. When it turns cold people stay at home and the cabarets are almost empty.'

He caught Bachelin's eye and, as there were only the two of them in the little room, entered into conversation.

'Are you an artiste too?'

Bachelin was for a moment at a loss; then replied.

'No, I'm a reporter.'

'I'm the pianist at *L'Ange Vert*.' He seemed in no hurry to venture out again into the cold air. 'Give me a spot of Calvados,' he said to the barman, and turning to Bachelin added 'Have one with me.'

They sat and talked beside the stove for half an hour.

'Where are you living?' the pianist asked.

'For the moment — nowhere!'

M Lucien showed no surprise. Nor did the barman, who had joined them by the stove.

'I can give you a shakedown for the night, anyhow, and tomorrow we'll see if we can fix something up.'

They climbed the Rue Lepic to its highest point, went through a dark passage, across a yard, and up a long flight of stairs to a small attic-room.

In the course of the night M Lucien had an impression that someone was moving in the room, and murmured sleepily —

'What's up?'

‘Nothing I was only looking for some water to drink ’
‘The jug’s beside the window ’

Bachelin had not undressed, as there were no spare blankets. At seven in the morning, when it was still almost dark, he was hurrying down the Rue Lepic, holding himself in so as not to break into a run. At the Place Blanche he jumped on to a moving bus. In the Boulevard Saint-Michel he entered an old-clothes shop and exchanged his waterproof for a narrow-waisted overcoat that was too tight for him. After paying the difference, forty francs, he found that he had just three hundred francs left.

Apparently three hundred was his mark! The dress-maker’s bag had contained three hundred odd, and there had been the same sum in the pianist’s wallet.

By eleven he was on the Nevers train, standing in the corridor, his face pressed to a window.

At five that afternoon, hearing a whistle, the woman at the cash-desk of the *Café de la Paix* said, as she always did, to no one in particular, merely to break the monotony of the afternoon.

‘There’s the Paris train ’

Dieudonné, Berthold, Jacquemin, and Lasserre had just come in. Olga, who was wearing a bunch of violets on her fur coat, was laboriously writing a letter. Through the window could be seen the dingy lights of the station and some taxis entering the station-yard.

It was snowing. The roofs were white; the cobbles black or white according to the street.

‘Tierce to the ace,’ Berthold announced.

‘Four knaves here,’ retorted the hunchback.

Lasserre was glancing at Olga over his cards and giving her little conspiratorial smiles – for they had met in the street on the previous evening and wound up by entering an accommodating hotel.

The people who had come by the Paris train were streaming past the windows, singly or in groups, all hurrying towards the centre of the town. Taxis sped past them, churning up the slush. The waiter was tinkering with the big bronze coffee-urn.

Suddenly the door was pushed violently forward, hung open for a moment, and a gaunt, bearded face loomed up against the outer darkness. One had the impression of a deliberately planned stage effect.

The hunchback pressed Berthold's foot under the table. Berthold looked up and gave a start when he saw the man standing in the doorway. Dieudonné, however, who had followed his look, said in a low tone:

'No, that's not him.'

Without a glance at them, but also without looking away, the man walked up to the bar and said loudly:

'A grog!'

Olga had stopped writing; she seemed fascinated by the man's glittering eyes, the auburn beard, the lips that trembled slightly as he waited for his drink.

He disposed of the contents of his tumbler at a gulp.

'The same again!'

The hunchback had a furtive grin. Berthold played the wrong card, flushed, cleared his throat, and pretended to be hunting in his pocket for his cigarettes.

'How much?'

'Six francs.'

He counted out the money slowly; his nerves must have been taut as violin-strings. His voice had grown hoarser and he held his head high, as if defying the world at large.

After placing six francs on the counter he buttoned his tight-fitting overcoat, turned up his collar and lowered the brim of his felt hat. On the way out he passed between the table at which his four friends were, and

'Well, if you're not too tired, I wish you'd play me Schumann's *Carnaval*.'

She went back to the piano-stool. From the street outside one could see the pink glow of two windows on the dark façade – for since the fire the yellow curtains had been replaced by white ones, and the lamp had a pink shade – hear a faint ripple of notes, and have occasional glimpses of M. Grandvalet's head as he leant forward to turn a page.

'Thank you, Juliette. And now shall we have a game of draughts? We haven't played draughts for ages.'

Mme Grandvalet, who had come in to listen, intervened.

'Don't bother the child. Can't you see she's tired?'

'Why not, Mamma? I'd like a game.'

She had always been docile. But always, too, she had given this impression of indifference. When she had finished her six hours at the piano she would do needle-work or read. But when she read, she never seemed really interested in the book. And she was capable of spending days on end in the flat without showing the least desire to go out.

'What would you like for your Christmas present this year?'

'I don't know. You'd better choose. ...'

Often and often, at the bank, her father would fall to thinking about her, a perplexed look on his face. 'Anyhow,' he told himself, 'she's quite forgotten that young scoundrel. She's never tried to find out what's become of him, and she certainly hasn't met anyone who could give her news.'

All the same, he made one slip. He left his son's letter, with the reference to Bachelin, lying on his desk, and there was no knowing if Juliette hadn't read it.

'Anyhow, my dear, in a couple of years I shall be re-

tiring, and the three of us will go to live in Paris, and you'll be able to study music at the Conservatoire. That'll be nice, won't it?'

'Very nice, Papa. Thank you.'

Snow was falling. Under the third lamp in the Rue Creuse, Jules Bachelin was leaning against a wall, gazing up at the pink glow of the windows.

Had Juliette ever really loved him? he was wondering. He cast his mind back to their first encounter – in the Municipal Registrar's office, where he was a clerk. She had come for a copy of her birth certificate. He had made some facetious remark, and she had smiled. Two days later, meeting her in the street, he raised his hat, and she acknowledged his greeting. After that he took to following her on her way home from her music-lesson. One evening, greatly daring, he had caught her up and spoken to her.

She hadn't made any difficulties then, when, some days later, he suggested taking another road, where there were fewer people, nor when for the first time he put his arm round her waist. Next day he kissed her; her lips had been soft and yielding – no more than that.

On that last evening all she said was –

'We mustn't see each other any more. It upsets my poor father so terribly.'

Bachelin heard Schumann's *Carnaval* from beginning to end. The pink-shaded lamp stayed on for another half-hour; then all was darkness.

So now he was free to go wherever he chose, and he fell to roaming the town, like an alley-cat hunting for food or shelter. People coming back from the pictures instinctively edged away when passing him in the darker streets.

It would be unsafe to spend the night at an hotel, where he might be recognized and his presence reported

to the police. In any case, the prospect of immuring himself in an hotel bedroom, with nobody to talk to, did not appeal to him in his present mood.

For company, the brothel ... and no sooner had he entered than a dark girl plumped herself down beside him. After giving him a long stare she asked him curiously :

‘What’s your job?’

Something about the young man told her that he followed no definite occupation. She also noticed that he seemed flattered by her interest and was smiling when he replied .

‘And what should you say it was?’

‘Something on the shady side, I’m pretty sure,’ she laughed.

The night was well advanced, and Bachelin the last customer. Three women were sitting round the fire, toasting their bare legs.

‘Have a guess what it is!’

‘Cheap-jack at fairs?’

He shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

‘You’ve a funny way of looking at one. ... Are you an artist?’

‘Don’t you ever read the papers?’ he asked.

‘Oh, that’s it. You write for the papers.’

‘No. They write about me!’ The girl looked thoroughly mystified, and he added: ‘They’ve even published my portrait.’

Wasn’t this the one place where he could talk about his exploit without risk; where, in fact, it would give him kudos?

‘Really? I don’t remember seeing it.’

‘That’s because I’ve grown a beard.’

He had another drink. He felt charged with nervous energy, capable of anything from murder downwards —

and yet, now and again, a picture would rise before him of the two pink-glowing windows, and he seemed to hear the sound of a piano echoing in the vaulted darkness of the narrow street, like music in an aisle

‘Be a sport! Tell us about it!’

A look of pride came to his face, and he gave the girl a leer that showed his teeth, then rapped the table with his knuckles for another round of drinks.

‘Can I stop the night here?’

‘You can come to my room if you like.’

‘You won’t split on me?’

She looked offended, and made as if to rise.

‘O.K.,’ he said ‘I only wanted to be sure. Let’s go upstairs.’

He was fagged out and took off only his collar and coat before slumping heavily on to the bed.

‘What part of the country do you come from?’ he asked between two yawns.

‘From Montpellier What about you?’

‘Oh, I used to live here, at Nevers’

She scanned him with more attention, bringing her face close to his

‘I’ve got it!’ she suddenly exclaimed. ‘You’re the young chap who set fire to his sweetheart’s house’

She lay down beside him, an elbow resting on the pillow, her cheek propped on her hand, and gazed intently at his face. He was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling. Immediately above his head was a big black hook from which in earlier days an oil-lamp had hung.

‘Why have you come back?’

His only answer was a retraction of his upper lip, the same grimace that had produced such an effect on Olga at the café.

‘Going to have another shot at burning them out? No!

I think I've guessed it. You're going to run away with the girl, aren't you?'

He nodded, and asked her for a cigarette. She lit one and put it between his lips.

'Is she really so pretty as all that? Is she in love with you?'

'Don't talk. I want to sleep.'

A minute later he was snoring. Again the girl brought her eyes near his face and scrutinized it gravely, then, with a sigh, shifted her position, let her limbs relax, and closed her eyes.

When he awoke next morning she was already dressing and the small clock on the table pointed to eleven. The roofs of the houses across the street were white with snow.

'You won't want to go out by daylight, will you?' she said.

He ran his eyes round the little room, the walls of which were covered with photographs and pictures cut out of magazines.

'Will your "Madam" let me stay here?'

'Oh, I can fix it up with her. Don't you bother.'

At lunch-time she brought him a couple of sandwiches. In the afternoon she had to go down to the parlour on duty, and he whiled away the time reading the old magazines piled in a corner of the room, and some chapters of a serial story of which the first instalments were missing.

On his way out, when dusk was falling, he ran into the girl who had befriended him, in the passage. She was in her working kit - a low-cut chemise, pink satin slippers.

'Oh, you're going out? Shall you be back tonight?'

'I expect so.'

He encountered Juliette at the exact spot where he had

expected to encounter her. She was wearing a new coat with a sealskin collar, and had her music-case under her arm. Mme Grandvalet, puffing and blowing, kept dawdling in front of the shop-windows, then putting on a spurt to catch her daughter up.

Bachelin walked quickly till he was a hundred yards ahead, on the opposite side of the road; then crossed towards them. He knew that Juliette's mother had never had a close view of him; in any case, his clothes were different and the beard made him almost unrecognizable.

The space between them was diminishing. By now Juliette, who was looking straight in front of her, must have seen him. But she walked steadily on, without the least sign of hesitation. When they were only two yards apart he had a clear view of her face in the light of a shop-window. It was perfectly calm.

For a second their eyes met, but when she had passed he still felt doubtful whether she had recognized him. Though he had brushed against her, there had been no response of any kind.

Looking over his shoulder, he saw the two women going to the door of the music-teacher's house and entering the hall. There was an hour to wait and he spent it in a rather squalid tavern, where two men in cloth caps kept eyeing him suspiciously.

He asked for a pen and writing-paper and, leaning on the beer-splashed zinc of the counter, wrote .

'I absolutely must have a talk with you'

The keen air rasped his cheeks. The streets were still dappled with white, though the snow had stopped falling. Bachelin took his stand at a safe distance from the music-teacher's door and waited, his whole body tense with expectation. And when, as Juliette brushed past

him he slipped the note into her hand, he hardly dared to look at her.

Anyhow it came off! Her fingers had closed on the slip of paper. So she had recognized him all right! Following behind, he saw her tuck the note into her bag. He vaguely hoped she would look round, but all the way she never turned her head. Only at the last moment, when she was on the doorstep of the house, did she move her head a little – not enough to see him – and there was, or seemed to be, a slight flutter of her hand in his direction.

That evening M. Grandvalet brought home a big box of Juliette's favourite *marrons glacés*, a treat usually reserved for New Year's Day. She was looking tired and, instead of pressing her to play the piano, he did his best to entertain her with cheerful conversation till bedtime came.

Only when the lights were out and he had gone to bed did he whisper in his wife's ear:

'He's back at Nevers!'

'Who?'

'That young rascal. One of my colleagues, Berthold, told me he'd noticed him yesterday at a café. He doesn't seem to mind being seen. I wonder if I shouldn't notify the police?'

His wife said nothing. They could hear Juliette moving in the next room as she undressed.

'Well, what do you think about it?'

'I .. I hardly know.'

'I wonder what can have brought him back – considering the risks he's running? Anyhow, we must be on our guard.'

For some time they lay side by side in the darkness, their eyes open, unable to sleep. At last M. Grandvalet slipped quietly out of the bed.

‘Where are you going?’ Only then did he realize that his wife had stayed awake, like himself.

‘Hush!’ he whispered; then held the door ajar and listened

A sound of steady breathing came from his daughter’s room and, reassured, he tiptoed back to bed, his feet numbed by their contact with the beeswaxed floor.

Bachelin was sitting in the comfortable warmth of the brothel parlour.

‘Well? Did you see her?’ asked the girl in whose bed he had slept the previous night.

He gazed at her blankly, and his expression conveyed that it was none of her business.

‘Madame was quite nice about you. Only, she told me you must come down a bit earlier tomorrow, because of the cleaning up. And – excuse me saying so – I think you’d better stand a round of drinks. It ain’t on my account I ask it.’

Without answering he rapped the table with his knuckles and said in a surly tone:

‘Champagne!’

They got through two bottles, after paying for which he had only fifty francs left. In the bedroom he was very short with the girl – but she took it meekly enough; the brothel had schooled her to submissiveness ... She was quite startled when she saw him preparing to go out as early as nine next morning

‘Well I never! ... Will you be coming back?’

‘May do.’

Her eyes fell on a fifty-franc note lying on the dressing-table. Half-naked as she was, she jumped out of bed, and for once looked quite annoyed

‘What do you mean by it?’ She pointed to the dressing-table ‘I don’t want none of your money.’

'Have it your own way.' He put the note back in his pocket.

'What are you going to do? Don't look like that! You fair give me the creeps. Now don't go and do anything foolhardy ..'

But already he was half-way down the narrow stairs. Dieudonné usually turned up at the *Paris-Centre* office at ten in the morning. On his way he had to cross the Place Carnot, and Bachelin waited for him there, fretting with impatience. The Central Police Station was only two hundred yards away.

The big square was almost empty, and all the open space in the centre covered with crisp snow. At three minutes to ten Dieudonné appeared, coming from the Rue de Paris. He was wearing a thick greatcoat and his breath formed a little cloud in front of his mouth.

He failed to recognize Bachelin till he saw him standing just in front, barring the way, and heard him bark out:

'Good morning'

And then he stopped abruptly, casting a nervous glance around as if to make sure that there were others within call.

Bachelin grinned.

'Don't be alarmed. I only want to ask a small favour of you. Lend me five hundred francs; you shall have them back, I promise you, next week, when I return to Paris.'

Dieudonné was a rather timid young man, with a pink-and-white complexion, blue eyes, plump, babyish lips.

'Why on earth did you come back?' he asked, for want of anything better to say.

'I've no time to explain. All I want is for you to lend me that five hundred. I'm in urgent need of it.'

'Sorry, I'm not sure I have that much on me'

Cold as it was, the young man unbuttoned his overcoat; then, taking off his woollen gloves, began counting the notes in his wallet.

'Two hundred Three Four hundred and twenty-five francs. That's the lot.' He was staring at the ground, afraid to look Bachelin in the face. 'Anyhow,' he added, 'I haven't given you away. And I told the other fellows to keep it under their hat. But you'd better watch out. In spite of that beard . '

Bachelin cut him short

'Thanks, old chap. I shan't forget the service you've done me ' He shook his friend's hand and strode away in the direction of the station.

He was chuckling to himself 'He was scared to death! They're all in a blue funk of me!'

That girl, too, at the brothel had been afraid of him, and, as she rather enjoyed feeling frightened, was willing to do whatever he asked her.

There were a few countryfolk queued up at the booking-office window. He approached the group in such a way that two of them, without being conscious of it, let him get in front of them.

'Two singles, Paris. Second-class.'

Giving a wide berth to the *Café de la Paix* – because of the waiter, who might well be in league with the police – he made his way to a small gunsmith's shop at the other end of the town.

'I want a revolver – the cheapest you have.'

Perhaps the gunsmith, too, was scared by his wild-eyed young customer. Especially as Bachelin made a point of handling the revolver as if he'd been employing such weapons all his life.

'A box of cartridges too '

As he walked out, his fingers closed on the butt of the revolver in his pocket.

Until nightfall he drifted from pub to pub, drinking enough to keep his courage up, but not enough to fuddle him.

At lunch M Grandvalet made signs to his wife to indicate that he wished to have a word with her in private, but she took some time to tumble to it. At last she made a move to the bedroom, leaving Juliette to clear the table by herself.

‘Try to find some reason to prevent her going to her music-lesson,’ he said in a low voice. ‘I don’t feel at all easy in my mind, with that young scoundrel about.’

‘What shall I tell her?’

‘Anything you like. That you’ve a cold, for instance.’

When he went back to the dining-room he was smiling, and announced in a cheerful tone :

‘I’ve a surprise in store for you – for your New Year’s treat.’

Juliette smiled too and, though he watched her closely, he saw no trace of any dissembled thought. A few minutes later he heard her saying :

‘You’d better go straight to bed, Mother. I’ll bring you a hot-water bottle and some yarrow tea.’

And, as Mme Grandvalet really had a cold, she submitted to her daughter’s ministrations, remarking, however .

‘It’s a pity about your music-lesson.’

‘Oh, missing one lesson won’t make much difference.’

The bedroom door was left ajar. Juliette put in an hour or so practising two polonaises; then, when it was time to turn on the light, shut the piano.

‘Where are you going?’ a sleepy voice enquired.

‘Something’s just been put in the letter-box. I’ll be back in a moment.’

She had neither a coat nor a hat on. Very quietly she opened the front door and, as she stepped out, looked

up the street to the place where she felt sure Bachelin would be. As she had no latch-key, she left the door ajar.

Timidly she approached the young man, who made no movement till she was close on him. Then he brought his hands down on her shoulders and gazed at her with eyes so fever-bright that she tried to free herself.

'Listen!' he said. Under his hands he felt a tremor run through her body. The two windows glowed softly through the darkness. 'You love me, don't you?'

She was on the verge of tears, and she gazed at him in silence, with blurred, fascinated eyes. Suddenly he flung his arms round her, pressing her so tightly that it took her breath away.

'If you don't come away with me I shall kill myself within the next five minutes.' He took the revolver from his pocket and held it in front of her. 'I can't live without you. Come with me to Paris. I've bought the tickets.'

She had still shed no tears; she felt dazed, her head was swimming, and only the fixity of Bachelin's gaze kept her on her feet.

'You won't? I'm going to fire. ...'

They were under the porch which had so often sheltered them, and now there was a faint creak overhead. The old maid on the first floor was opening her window.

'But ... I haven't brought my coat,' she protested weakly.

*

'You'll wait for me here? You swear it?'

Her teeth were chattering, and she gave a quick nod. Passers-by were staring, so Bachelin took her up a side-street and left her there while he rushed into the *Nouvelles Galeries*, blinking his eyes at the sudden glare. For ladies' outfitting he had to climb to the third floor,

and he bought the first coat shown him, a shoddy, greenish-grey contraption costing a hundred and twenty francs. To avoid asking the way to the hat department he bought a Basque béret that he had noticed on one of the ground-floor counters. Chafing with impatience, he waited while the assistant wrapped it up.

Juliette was where he had left her. He tore the parcels open and dropped the paper in the gutter.

'Here you are!' he said triumphantly.

It gave him an unexpected thrill, seeing her so shabbily dressed. He could hardly believe the girl before him was the daughter of the punctilious M. Grandvalet; the demure young person who took daily piano-lessons and played Chopin in the pink glow of a bourgeois drawing-room.

'The train doesn't leave for half an hour. How about a drink to warm you up?'

'I'm not thirsty.'

And now it was he who felt like weeping – with happiness and pride, and pity for her and for himself.

'I'll make you happy, Juliette. You can bank on that. ...'

He had an impression that she was smiling and, as they walked on side by side, put his arm round her waist. Suddenly she exclaimed:

'Oh dear! I left the door open!'

'What on earth does that matter – now?'

They were only a hundred yards or so from the brothel, and he'd have dearly liked to drop in and tell the woman there that he had pulled it off.

'We'll get out at Laroche and take another train. That'll put them off the scent.'

An idea occurred to him as they were passing the tavern in which he had written the note to Juliette.

'Come in here for a moment. It's quite safe.'

The man behind the bar, who recognized him, promptly asked :

‘A rum?’

‘Two rums. And a pen and ink and paper, please.’

There was only one table, in a corner. Bachelin made Juliette sit down at it, placed a sheet of paper in front of her and dictated :

‘My dear parents, — Do not try to find me I am very happy If anyone forced me to come home I should kill myself .’

She refrained from looking up at him. He was quivering with exultation. Each word she wrote was another token of his triumph. But he had an anxious moment when, after he had finished dictating, he saw the pen come down again on the paper.

‘Please forgive me, Papa,’ she added.

Without waiting for the ink to dry, he folded the letter, put it in an envelope and said to the barman :

‘Here’s five francs. Will you have this letter delivered *immediately* at Number Three, Rue Creuse? ... Wait! Give me another rum first.’

His forehead was beaded with sweat.

III

It was eight in the morning when they entered a fourth-floor room in an hotel in the Rue des Dames. Juliette’s first sight of Paris had been a series of empty streets, white with hoar-frost and swept by an icy wind. But for a few monstrous buses rumbling by, Paris was like a city of the dead.

Though the sun had risen, the light was bleak and

grey, and as the room overlooked a well-like courtyard, surrounded by blank walls, they had to turn on the electric lamp.

After a casual glance round the room Bachelin murmured: 'It's not too bad.' He said it merely to break the silence which had fallen on them. His head ached and he was so exhausted that he felt like being sick.

Juliette had slept through most of the journey; they were fortunate enough to have one side of the carriage to themselves and she had been able to lie down. He, however, had spent the greater part of the night prowling in the corridor, sometimes halting to scratch a tiny peephole in the frost-glaze on the windows and peer into the darkness.

He had fleeting glimpses of snow-clad fields, lovely farms, black-and-white roofs, and church-spires. And with the ending of the night, lights began to twinkle here and there across the gloom.

When he came to the carriage he found Juliette stirring in her sleep. Without opening her eyes she sighed. 'I'm cold.'

He sat down in the corner and started rubbing her feet, which were cold as ice. That was the only attention he showed her. There was another couple in the carriage, but even had they been alone, he would probably have behaved in much the same manner. Both of them seemed to be living in a fantastic dream, without a notion when or where they would awake. At one moment one was half stifled by the heat, and at another shivering, according to the draughts.

Once or twice Bachelin noticed that Juliette had her eyes open, but she didn't seem to see him. She was staring into vacancy, her eyes void of thought.

Now in the bedroom she was standing with her back to the little radiator, her palms pressed to the tubes, in

which the water was no more than tepid. Trying to seem at ease, Bachelin took off his overcoat and shifted the position of the solitary armchair, the upholstery of which was torn and greasy.

‘Feel like having some breakfast?’

‘I’m not hungry.’

They avoided looking at each other. Juliette could hear noises behind her back, in the adjoining bedroom: the sound of a running tap, then a series of snorts as if someone found the water too cold for his liking. It was a man, and there followed a sound that Juliette recognized – she had often heard it in her father’s bedroom – of someone stropping a razor.

People from the fifth and sixth floor rooms were tramping down the stairs. On the landing outside a chambermaid was cleaning shoes.

Bachelin touched Juliette’s shoulder.

‘You’d better lie down for a bit.’

He helped her off with the green coat, and drew her towards the bed.

‘Now get undressed.’

He walked to the window and gazed at the courtyard, frowning. For some moments there was no sound and, without turning his head, he said :

‘Hurry up, Juliette.’

At last he heard a rustle of clothes, the light thuds of two shoes dropped on the floor one after the other, then a faint creak of the bed-springs. When he looked round, Juliette had buried herself so deep in the bed that all he could see was a smudge of hair on the pillow.

In awkward haste he took off some of his clothes and pressed the electric switch, leaving the room bathed in cold wintry light.

A voice murmured from between the sheets. ‘What are you doing?’

He lay down beside her and felt that she, too, was half-undressed. When he tried to kiss her mouth she moved her head and his lips found only her cheek.

'Don't, please!' she murmured. 'I'm so tired. Do let me sleep.'

For some minutes he lay quite still, wondering what to do. Gradually Juliette's breathing became more regular, her body warm. When he made a slight movement, she whispered, with a little, ineffectual thrust of her arm, to keep him away.

'Not now!'

At last she fell silent, her eyes wide open, fixed on the man's face turned to hers, her features drawn with pain. ...

*

She was lying now with her face towards the wall, and, thinking she was asleep, he dressed as quietly as he could, moving about the room on tiptoe. When ready to go out, he tore a leaf out of his pocket-diary and scribbled. 'Will be back about noon. Love.'

But just as he was placing the note on the bedside-table he heard Juliette's voice.

'Where are you going?'

For a moment he was at a loss. Juliette turned her head and a corner of her face appeared between the counterpane and the pillow. What, above all, held his gaze was an eye, intent on him.

'Are you going to your work?' she asked.

'Yes. I'll be back at about twelve and I'll bring some grub, so that we can have our lunch here.'

He had put his hat on. He bent to kiss her, but again she moved her mouth away, and only proffered her forehead.

'Don't you want to kiss me?'

‘Not now’

Bachelin’s face hardened.

‘Are you regretting it?’ Why didn’t she answer at once? ‘Are you sorry you ... you came away with me? Well? Why don’t you answer?’

‘Oh, do let me sleep,’ she sighed, turning her head to the wall

It put him in a bad temper for the rest of the morning. He had no notion where to go. He knew this part of Paris, the neighbourhood of the Place Clichy, only too well. Day after day during the last two months he had roamed it, till every street, indeed every house, was as familiar to him as the streets and houses of Nevers.

His idea, when he left the hotel, was to look for work, and he bought a paper with a view to studying the list of situations vacant. An icy wind was blowing and the surface of the Boulevard was hard and resonant underfoot. Now and again a gust whirled up tiny particles of ice that stung and seemed to pierce the skin like needles.

He entered a bar and ordered a hot grog. But, though it warmed him up, he was unable to shake off a feeling of profound dejection or discouragement. Strictly speaking, perhaps, it was neither one nor the other, but something more insidious. As he leant against the bar-counter he was wondering what on earth he was doing here, what had prompted this mad escapade to Paris. There seemed no link between his present situation and the past, or any conceivable future. The thought of Juliette sleeping in the hotel bedroom filled him with consternation.

‘The same again,’ he said to the man behind the bar, who in his shirt-sleeves was polishing a copper coffee-urn.

At this hour there were never any customers. An aged sandwich-man slouched past the window, bent between

his boards, and Bachelin fixed on him the hard, suspicious stare he might have given an over-plausible clairvoyante.

When, laden with small parcels, the makings of a cold lunch, and a bottle of wine under his arm, he returned to the hotel, he found Juliette fully dressed and sitting at the window, sewing.

'Whatever are you up to?' He was surprised to see her working.

'I'm altering my coat.'

'Where did you find that needle and thread, and the scissors?'

'Oh, I went downstairs and saw the manageress. She's lent them to me.'

Amazing girl! On her own initiative she had ventured down the stairs, tackled the manageress in her ground-floor den, where the lamp was kept on all day, and got what she wanted!

'Did she say anything?'

'Yes. She wants to know if we're taking the room by the month or by the week.'

There was no mistaking it. The expression of Juliette's eyes had changed. She was watching him now as if she were trying to size him up, and it made him embarrassed.

'Why are you looking at me like that?'

'Like what?'

'Oh, never mind! ... But you might have given me a kiss.'

She rose from her chair and gave him her lips submissively.

'Yes,' he said, as he began to set out on the table the contents of his parcels, 'we'll take the room by the month. But of course we shan't be staying here very long. As soon as I've a little money in hand we'll look round

for a small flat and furnish it. ... By the way, I hope you like Bologna sausage.'

'Stop! Don't put the bread on that filthy table-cloth,' she broke in, and the remark affected him disagreeably; he scented a reproach.

'Oh, it's not so filthy as all that!'

'It is. All sorts of people have used this room. Look at the back of that armchair, it's black with grease.'

'Well, what do you expect of an hotel bedroom?' he asked sulkily.

But a moment later, when, facing each other across the table, they began their meal, he gazed at her contritely and, laying his hand on hers, said.

'I'm sorry, Juliette.'

'What for?'

'For not being nicer to you. Only ... no, you can't understand.'

A rush of emotion came over him and he had a sudden impulse to take her in his arms and weep his heart out on her shoulder. Perhaps it was the sight of her tranquillity that stirred him so deeply. She was near the window, bathed in the lack-lustre light of a December day. She was wearing a plain black dress and eating the meal with as simple, natural gestures as if she were lunching in her parents' dining-room, and she seemed quite unaware that squares of greasy paper were doing duty as plates. And she had not the least idea that both of them were friendless, penniless, helpless in a hostile world.

'What time do you go back to work?'

'At two — or I might make it half-past two today.'

'What sort of work is it?'

To gain time he took a large mouthful and chewed it slowly.

'Well — er — for the moment I'm traveller for some

manufacturing chemists But I'm hoping for something better.'

His appetite had gone. She had noticed nothing and went on pecking at her food, casting occasional glances out of the window. After some moments' meditation she said .

'I might work too But I suppose it's not so easy finding a job in these days '

'You ... work?' He bristled up at once. 'What on earth could *you* do?'

'Well, I might play the piano at a picture-house, for instance.'

'They don't have pianos in picture-houses nowadays.'

'Oh, but at Nevers '

'We're not at Nevers '

He rose and started pacing up and down the room, After some minutes' silence she came and sat on the bed and he saw it had been made.

'Has the chambermaid been up?'

'For the bed, you mean? No, I made it myself.'

It was getting on his nerves, that way she had of looking at him with thoughtfully appraising eyes, and at last he blurted out :

'Why are you looking at me like that? Anything wrong with my appearance?'

'What *do* you mean?'

'You keep watching me, as if I were some queer sort of animal!'

'Oh, why will you always imagine things? It isn't fair! Really you seem to take a sort of pleasure in saying things to hurt me.'

'So that's it! I want to hurt you! ... I, of all people! Juliette, how can you talk like that?'

He was utterly despondent; sick of himself, of the whole business. Things were turning out so differently

from his expectation, and, worst of all, he had an impression that the situation had got out of hand.

Angrily he flung himself on the bed and lay quite still, his jaws clenched, his eyes turned to the wall. He listened intently. Juliette did not stir from her place at the table, but she had stopped eating.

After some minutes' silence she came and sat on the bed, bending over him.

'It's time for you to be starting,' she said gently. 'You mustn't take too much notice of what I say. My nerves, too, are out of order.'

He broke into a fit of weeping; it came so abruptly that he struggled for breath. Juliette stroked his forehead.

'Don't worry. It's over. ... I didn't mean to hurt you. Everything's quite all right.'

He put his arms round her and she felt his tears wetting her cheeks. Through a mist of tears he saw her pale, delicately moulded face and could discover no emotion on it but compassion and bewilderment.

Unclasping her arms, he pushed her away, so as to blow his nose. Then, walking across to the looking-glass, he dried his cheeks.

'Whatever came over you?'

'I don't know. ... You're right. I must ... I must be getting to my work.'

He had a crazy impulse to sweep on to the floor the food remaining on the table, but restrained himself.

'Good-bye. I'll be back this evening. Don't go out.'

'Why should I go out? I don't even know where I am!'

His cheeks were raw and the cold wind outside made his eyelids smart like fire. The newspaper was still in his overcoat-pocket. Half-way down the Boulevard he unfurled it and almost at random picked out an advertisement:

'Wanted, smart, energetic young man, for sale of a new product. Apply 18, Rue d'Hauteville'

Out of bravado he went. There were some thirty men waiting in the vestibule, and night had fallen when his turn came to enter a small office where, without even a glance at him, an elderly bespectacled man sitting at a desk enquired:

'Have you any references, or can you name anyone who will vouch for you?'

Bachelin gave Dieudonné's name and the address of the newspaper he worked for; then added Lasserre's. A girl typist produced an attaché-case in imitation leather and made a rapid inventory of its contents: five brushes of different kinds—a clothes-brush, hat-brush, boot-brush, scrubbing-brush and finally a nail-brush, all of them mounted on wire-mesh frames.

'Sign this receipt,' said the man at the desk. 'You have thirty per cent commission on sales. What section, Mademoiselle?'

'From the Place de la République to the Bastille.'

Bachelin put the attaché-case under his arm and walked out. The next man in the queue brushed past him on his way to the desk; there had been an unbroken stream of applicants since noon. The typist ran after Bachelin; he had forgotten to take the price-list and order-block.

By the time he emerged into the Rue d'Hauteville, down which big lorries were rumbling in an endless stream, he had already lost all desire to try his hand at selling the brushes. His first idea was to drop the attaché-case on a doorstep; then, remembering the man who kept the tavern in the Place Clichy and was beginning to know him, he thought better of it, and waited for a bus.

As usual at this hour, the tavern was full of people tak-

ing their evening appetizers, and there was a pungent smell of absinthe in the air. Standing at a corner of the bar, Bachelin ordered a Pernod, and waited till he could have a word with the proprietor.

At last a moment came when the man was less busy, and producing one of the brushes in his attaché-case he held it across the counter.

‘What do you think of this?’

The barman examined it, then passed it on to a customer who wanted to have a look.

‘Not too bad,’ he remarked, rather grudgingly it seemed.

Thereat Bachelin produced the other four brushes.

‘How much the lot? Fifty francs?’ He could not keep a tremor of nervousness out of his voice.

‘Too much,’ the barman said. ‘Thirty francs.’

‘Make it thirty-five.’

The customer cut in.

‘Right. I’ll take ’em at thirty-five.’

‘Two Pernods,’ said Bachelin. ‘Look here, if you’d like this attaché-case you can have it at the same price.’

He was very flushed. The room was suffocatingly hot, the windows coated with steam. Every time the door opened there was a burst of noise from the crowded square.

‘Well, I must be getting back to my wife,’ he said, after paying for the drinks.

His buyer caught his arm and held him back.

‘Wait! Have one with me first ... The same again.’

What could Juliette have found to do all by herself in the poky little bedroom where there wasn’t a single object belonging to her? Nearly seven hours had passed since he left her, and he was eager to be back. All the same, he stayed to finish off the drink the man had stood him.

'Do you live near here?'

'In the Rue des Dames.'

'I'm in the Rue de Lancry. That's in the same direction.'

So they crossed the square together, dodging between taxis and buses, and shook hands when they parted. Neither knew the other's name

Bachelin could hardly drag himself up the four flights of stairs. The drinks, instead of reviving his energy, seemed to have made him even wearier. He opened the door very quietly, and his heart missed a beat when he found the room in darkness

But when he turned on the light he saw Juliette lying curled up on the bed, fully dressed. Her cheeks, too, were flushed. The light had not awakened her. Her breathing was steady but laboured, as if something were oppressing her. Each time she exhaled, her lower lip pouted a little, her mouth opened, her chest heaved slowly.

There were voices in the next room, a man's and a woman's, but it was impossible to distinguish the words. Only the general tone of the conversation could be made out, a series of desultory remarks, with longish pauses between them. Now and again there came a clink of plates. Evidently, like many of the people in the hotel, this couple cooked their meals in their bedroom. They had, it seemed, a Primus or something of the kind, for the faint hiss of a flame under pressure could be heard intermittently.

In the room overhead someone was pacing to and fro, and the footsteps sounded like a woman's. She, too, presumably had just come back from her work. Two girls raced down the stairs, chattering and laughing.

But Juliette slept on, oblivious of the stir of life around her. Dreaming, perhaps, that she was back at Nevers and presently her mother would come and wake her; that she

would sit down at the piano and hear her father's voice, asking for his favourite *Polonaise*

Bachelin had taken off his overcoat, and, lying back in the armchair, was gazing dully at the bed and the girl's sleeping form. At this hour the water in the radiator was near boiling-point and he could feel eddies of dry heat swirling round his temples. The light was poor and the grey and yellow stripes of the wallpaper merged in a hueless blur.

There was now a rattle of knives and forks in the next room. Bachelin rose to his feet abruptly, hearing a knock; but it wasn't at his door. Juliette changed the position of an arm, took a deep breath, and rolled over, but without waking; rather relapsing with a sigh into still deeper sleep.

Cars and buses were rumbling past in the distance. Bachelin shut his eyes. He had an impression of being jolted to and fro, but gradually the jolts settled down to the steady rhythm of a train, and he fancied himself standing in the corridor, scratching out a peep-hole on the frosted pane so as to gaze at the snow-clad countryside.

The rhythm quickened, slowed down, gathered speed again, and suddenly he was on his feet, his eyes wide open, staring at the door.

There had been a crash, or rather a series of loud thuds. Juliette was sitting up on the bed, her eyes big with alarm.

'Whatever is it?'

Mastering his fear, he unlocked the door and peeped into the passage. He saw a drunk man, who had fallen at the head of the stairs, laboriously picking himself up.

Juliette had left the bed and was smoothing out the creases in her skirt. Her hair was ruffled and the pattern

of the embroidered counterpane had left a reddish imprint on her left cheek

'What was it?' she repeated, puckering her brows with the effort to collect her wits.

'Oh, only a drunk. He had a spill at the top of the stairs.'

The room seemed to have become darker, as if the lamp were failing. A curious embarrassment came over both as they stood gazing at each other. At last Juliette moved, went to the wash-basin and filled a glass at the tap. Before drinking she asked.

'Would you like some?' As he did not reply she took a sip and added 'I've slept like a log. What's the time?'

'Haven't an idea. Midnight, perhaps' He had no watch. After a moment he said. 'Yes, I'd like a drink'

She gave him the glass. The water was ice cold. After taking a mouthful he handed the glass back to her and she drank again. While doing so she gazed at her reflexion in the mirror above the basin.

Neither knew what to do or say next, or how to dispel the feeling of constraint that still possessed them, as they stood a few feet from each other in the cramped little room, where the armchair was always in the way. Bachelin made the first move. He turned down the bedclothes, slowly, half-heartedly, as if he were thinking 'There's no way out of it!'

When he turned, Juliette was close beside him, watching him nervously. He drew her gently to his breast, pressing her head to his shoulder, but did not try to touch her lips with his. He felt as if he wanted never to move again, but to remain thus, without speaking, gazing above her bowed head at the yellowish haze of the wall-paper, the glimmering darkness of the window.

A small, plaintive voice murmured in his ear:

'You're not nice. ...'

He made a clumsy movement that sent the armchair jingling on its loose castors across the floor, and someone in the next room rapped sharply on the wall, protesting at the noise.

IV

'ARE you quite certain no one's been to see me?' asked M. Grandvalet as he carefully let fall the last drop of cream into his coffee-cup.

'I'll go and ask again,' the waiter said.

M. Grandvalet watched him talking to the manageress, who was seated at the cash-desk of the restaurant. From her manner he inferred that nobody had come and, gazing dully in front of him, whiled away the time by gathering the crumbs on the table-cloth into a little heap.

He had been in Paris for nearly three weeks and had just written to the bank for an extension of his leave. But in his heart of hearts he knew this was a mere formality; from the moment of leaving Nevers he had had a feeling that his days at the bank were numbered.

On the morning after Juliette's departure he had dressed as usual, kissed his wife and started off to work. But before he had gone half of the familiar way he turned abruptly on his heel, and it had been a struggle to fight down an impulse to break into cries of anger and despair, to shake his fist at the grey indifference of the sky, and even, perhaps, to accost the first passer-by and read out to him that pathetic little farewell letter from his daughter, his voice shaken by sobs. It was even worse when, on his return, his eyes fell on the big piano standing open with a Chopin album on the rest, and he had felt like hammering the keyboard with his fists, tearing the album into shreds.

For what seemed hours and hours he had wandered aimlessly about the flat while his wife was packing his suitcase.

‘Yes, you’d better go to Paris. It’s quite possible you’ll find her and be able to have a talk with her’

Mme Grandvalet’s travelling days were over; she had grown stout, lymphatic, and her legs had swollen to a prodigious size. But she did her best to see that nothing was forgotten as she waddled in her slippers between the wardrobe and the suitcase.

Her husband had left by the night train. After hearing the street door bang behind him he had been seized by a sudden panic and had run almost all the way to the station.

On his infrequent visits to Paris he always stayed at the same hotel, the *Hôtel du Centre* near the Gare de Lyon, in a street almost as tranquil as the Rue Creuse. The hotel, which lay at the back of a spacious courtyard, was chiefly patronized by elderly people who had been using it for years; many of them had private napkin-rings marked with their initials. There was an atmosphere of staid decorum, the floors were as highly polished as those of a nunnery, and there was usually a priest or two at meals.

At the table next to M. Grandvalet’s was a sad-faced woman in black; she had come to Paris, he learnt, to have her little boy examined by a specialist. The manageress, too, was dressed in black, and she had a gold cross hanging on her breast.

For several days M. Grandvalet felt too dazed, too exhausted by his emotions, to take any active measures. Still, once or twice he had ventured forth on foot into the centre of the city, only to return still more dejected, convinced that he had come on a fool’s errand.

The obvious thing to do was to look up his son,

Philippe, who lived in the Rue Championnet, but he kept on postponing the visit. Philippe had always, even after his marriage, taxed his father with showing an undue preference for Juliette. Indeed, high words had passed between them when M. Grandvalet had announced that he was presenting her with a semi-grand piano.

In his present state the task of confessing to his son that Juliette had run away with a worthless young scamp was more than he felt up to.

Lost in his musings, M. Grandvalet had not seen the waiter coming up.

'There's someone to see you, sir. He's waiting in the lobby.'

His heart gave a lurch, and it was an effort to steady his nerves; for he had been anticipating this moment with mingled impatience and alarm.

As he rose from his seat he was asking himself anxiously if he had acted for the best. His wife had written - '*I think you had better get in touch with a priest who knows Paris well and ask his advice.*' But though there were two priests staying at the hotel and others whom he passed at mealtimes in the beeswaxed corridor leading to the restaurant, he had not followed his wife's advice.

After plunging into the rush-hour crowds on two or three occasions, on the remote off-chance of catching sight of his daughter - these experiences had left him dazed and breathless - he had taken to studying certain advertisements appearing daily in the papers, clamped on a strip of metal, that the waiter brought him every morning.

'Private Detective Bureau. Enquiries of all descriptions undertaken by a retired Inspector of Police. Strictest secrecy guaranteed. Highest testimonials.'

At first he blushed at the mere thought. ... But a day came when, vanquishing his scruples, he made his way to a gloomy block of buildings near the Central Market, and climbed three flights of the dirtiest stairs he had ever set foot on. Two days had elapsed since then. He had left a deposit of three hundred francs. Then the man had rung him up.

'Can you come out with me this evening?' I believe I'm on their track.'

M. Grandvalet was wearing a high wing-collar, a dark tie, gold sleeve-links. The enquiry agent, M. Émile, a fat, badly dressed little man, was stumping up and down the lobby, a bowler hat on his head.

'Ready?'

'Yes. I'll just get my overcoat.'

'There's no hurry. It doesn't really get going till half-past nine.'

M. Grandvalet didn't dare to ask what it was that got going at half-past nine. The enquiry agent led him to a taxi and told the driver to stop at the Place Blanche.

'Of course I can't be certain it's your daughter; all I can say is that she's mighty like the photograph you gave me.'

That was another thing which made him blush; the thought that this rather vulgar little man was walking the streets of Paris with Juliette's photograph in his pocket – along with other photographs and an assortment of well-thumbed papers that he was continually fishing out of his pocket.

'Anyhow, if it's she, she's had her hair bobbed.'

A lump came to M. Grandvalet's throat and he watched the lights streaming past with hazy eyes. When the taxi cut in past a motor bus he clutched his companion's arm, convinced that there was going to be an accident.

'Six francs fifty on the clock. Add seventy-five centimes

for the tip 'That's where we're going - the Moulin Rouge'

Spangled with lights, the slow sails of the red mill churned the darkness. M. Grandvalet followed his guide meekly, but all the while he was feeling so wretched that he'd have given much to call the venture off

'Take two tickets. Five francs each.'

They entered an enormous room, ablaze with lights, in which some five hundred people were dancing

'Would you rather sit down or stand?'

He elected to stand, though he was constantly being jostled, and hurrying waiters jabbed his shoulders with their upheld trays. He gazed wonderingly at the faces of the girls: scarlet lips, heavily mascara'd eyes

'Are all these women of ... of the unfortunate class?'

'Not a bit of it. Most of them are perfectly decent, hard-working young people - typists, shop-girls, clerks, and so on. The professionals hang round the bar. The girl we want isn't here yet. She never turns up much before ten. Perhaps her boy friend has a job that keeps him late.'

When one band stopped, another struck up at once; there was never a moment's break in the music. The feverish rhythms of jazz pounded on M. Grandvalet's nerves, and he felt his heart-beats quickening. M. Émile had unbuttoned his coat and was puffing at his pipe, his hands in his pockets.

'Look!' he suddenly exclaimed. 'There she is!'

But M. Grandvalet gazed in vain, and the enquiry agent had to take his arm and guide his eyes to a very young, sickly-looking girl who had no resemblance whatever to Juliette. A youth with brown hair parted in the middle accompanied her.

'Well? Is that your daughter?'

'No.'

‘Really?’ M. Émile didn’t seem in the least put out. ‘In that case, let’s make a move. It was worth trying, anyhow, and you’re not pressed for time, are you?’ Usually it’s here I spot them after they’ve been some days in Paris – or else at Luna Park, or the Coliseum, or, if the girl hasn’t much in the way of clothes, at one of the cheaper places. If it’s a servant-girl, one can generally run her to earth at the *bals musettes*; you know what they are, don’t you? Poky little places where they dance to a concertina. Would you believe it? Over two thousand girls disappear in Paris every year! These young folk nowadays, they’re the limit!’

The street along which they were walking was lined with cabarets and small theatres

‘How about looking in at the Coliseum?’ M. Émile suggested ‘It’s only five minutes’ walk from here’

‘That would be quite useless. I’m convinced my daughter isn’t there.’

The enquiry agent shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

‘That’s what they always tell me.’

‘Listen, M. Émile! I want that photo back’

‘Ah, you want me to drop the enquiry, is that it?’

M. Grandvalet was shy. He was afraid of hurting the man’s feelings; but still more afraid, perhaps, of being left to his own resources.

‘I don’t know,’ he murmured weakly

‘I’ve just had an idea. And it will show you I’m acting on the square. I did ten years’ service in the *Police Judiciaire*, and I’ve still some good friends at headquarters. Tomorrow we’ll look up one of them, a bloke called Jusseume. He’s one of the best, and I’m sure he’ll give a helping hand. The first thing is to inspect the Visitors’ Lists of the cheap hotels and lodging-houses.’

‘I don’t much like the idea of going to the police. As I

told you, I don't want the young man to think the police are after him. And I know what my daughter is like. They'd be quite capable of ... of doing something desperate.'

'The police will do what we ask them to do, and nothing more. You surely don't imagine they want to waste their time running in every silly young fool who's got himself into a mess over a girl!'

They had come to the Coliseum. A commissionaire opened the door for them, and bursts of music reached their ears.

'Shall we have a look inside?'

'No, really I'd rather not, if you don't mind.'

'Please yourself. . . In that case I shall call for you tomorrow morning at ten, and we'll have a chat with Jusseaume. It'll all go quite smoothly, I assure you. Good night.'

The expression on the night-porter's face when he let M. Grandvalet into the hotel showed his suspicion that the worthy cashier had been sampling the delights of Parisian night-life. And indeed M. Grandvalet had a restless night, the sort of night that follows heavy drinking. At eight he rose, shaved, and dressed with his usual punctiliousness, and went down for his breakfast beside the stucco-work grotto, in which a trickle of water dripped from artificial crags.

To occupy himself till the enquiry agent came, he asked for writing materials and started a letter to his wife.

'I have been fortunate enough to find a thoroughly reliable man, who is proving most helpful in my quest. He is to call for me here this morning and will put me in touch with a friend of his who is well-placed to render us assistance.'

Just then, as chance would have it, the waiter brought him a letter from his wife.

'I cannot help thinking you would do better not to persist. You know what your daughter is like. She has always been stubborn, and nothing you can say or do (assuming you succeed in finding her) will have the least effect. It would be much better if you left things to Philippe, who knows his way about Paris much better than you do.'

On the next page she wrote :

'The Income Tax Demand forms have come in, but I shall do nothing till you are back. M. Mortier called yesterday and enquired after you. He thought you had gone to Paris to consult a doctor. I can't think why, but I started crying when he said that, and little by little I came out with everything

'I was not dressed properly, as he came at two and I hadn't finished washing up! it was most uncomfortable. I promised him that you would be back at the end of the week, and then he went away without saying anything.'

M. Mortier was the manager of the bank, and, knowing him as he did, M. Grandvalet felt convinced that he was in a furious temper when he went away without saying anything.'

He proceeded to tear up the letter he had written to his wife into little strips of exactly the same size, with the same meticulous attention as he had given on the previous day to squeezing the last drop out of his cream-jug. From where he sat one could see into the sitting-room, and a sound of muffled sobs drew his eyes in that direction. It was a dreary little room; the upholstery on the

chairs had faded to a neutral grey. He saw the lady in mourning seated in one of them, tears rolling down her cheeks, and a priest at her side trying to console her. Had the specialist announced that there was no hope for her son? Or was she still mourning for her husband?

Glancing at the clock he saw it was ten to ten, and he was strongly tempted to write a note of excuse to the detective and, following his wife's advice, to take the next train back to Nevers. And perhaps he would have done so had not the fat little detective appeared just at that moment, his cheeks glowing from his walk in the cold air, beads of moisture sparkling on his moustache and shoulders.

'Ready, M. Grandvalet?' Just a moment, please. Waiter, bring me a hot grog. . . Wrap yourself up well,' he added 'It's freezing hard.'

He entered the headquarters of the *Police Judiciaire* with the assurance of a man who feels himself at home, and crossed a courtyard in a corner of which M. Grandvalet observed a notice. '*Children's Court.*' On the right of the staircase was a big, barn-like room in which, though the morning was well advanced, all the lights were on. Through the dusty panes one could see walls lined with file-cases all the way up to the ceiling.

'We'll be going there presently. That's where they keep the records of the visitors at hotels and lodging-houses, and I'm pretty sure they'll help us to get on the track of our young couple.'

M. Grandvalet kept silent. He was impressed not by the dignity of his surroundings but by their spaciousness and austerity. Even the barracks at which he had been quartered in his youth were not so forbidding in aspect. They passed men coming down the staircase, talking at the top of their voices; members of the staff, presumably. M. Émile shook hands with one of them.

'Hullo, old chap! How about getting together somewhere?'

'Right-o Twelve o'clock at the *Chope du Pont-Neuf*.'

He opened a glazed door and they entered a long, wide corridor. On each door was inscribed the name of a police officer and his rank. Here, too, people were coming and going, talking loudly, with documents in their hands.

'Wait for me a moment,' M. Émile said, and entered one of the offices. After a quarter of an hour he came out, smoking a cigar. 'I've fixed it up. Jusseaume will take us after he's finished with that tart.'

He slewed his eyes round on a girl seated on a bench beside the doorway, her eyes fixed on the dirty floor. M. Grandvalet had already noticed her and wondered what this well-dressed young woman was doing here.

'What is she here for?'

'Oh, she's suspected of having killed the fellow she lived with, but there's no evidence so far. Her story is that he took an overdose of "snow".'

M. Émile was still exchanging greetings with former colleagues, he seemed on the best of terms with everybody here. Some Algerians in rags and tatters were mooning about the corridor, looking at the various doors but too timid to knock at any. A little man with red hair, who looked like a farm-hand, was led past, handcuffed, and taken out by the glazed door.

Even now M. Grandvalet hardly knew why he had been brought to this distasteful place. M. Émile puffed placidly at his cigar, now and again going up to the woman he had described as a 'tart', and inspecting her from head to foot.

M. Grandvalet's eyes fell on a marble slab let into the wall, bordered in black and surrounded by a hundred or more small oval photographs. '*Members of the Police*

Judiciaire who died for their country, 1914-1918.'

A door opened and a tall, burly man in a sloppy lounge suit, a pencil wedged behind his ear, said to the girl :

'Come in '

As he closed the door he glanced up the passage and his eyes lingered for a moment on M. Grandvalet.

'I know pretty well everyone here,' M. Émile said, 'except some of the new-comers. That office on the left belongs to the Public Morals Brigade. The one on the right .'

At last M. Grandvalet sat down. What with the heat and the long wait he felt as exhausted as if he had been walking for miles. The girl came out of the office, her eyes red with weeping. In her confusion she had forgotten her bag, and the inspector ran after her and thrust it into her hand. M. Grandvalet observed them with unseeing eyes. His mind was fogged; he had lost track of everything, of the time and place, almost of his own identity.

'Will you step into my office?' My friend Émile has told me of your trouble, and I hope we can help you. Please sit down '

Unlike the corridor, the office was well lit, by three big windows overlooking the Seine. But the light had a curious bleakness, like that of an operating-theatre. There were three mahogany chairs, upholstered in green, and the desk, too, was of mahogany. On the black marble mantelpiece, over which was a big, tarnished mirror, stood a Louis-Philippe clock, flanked by two branched candlesticks.

After filling his pipe the inspector pushed his tobacco-pouch towards his visitor.

'No, thanks. I don't smoke '

'It comes to this,' the enquiry agent said. 'His daughter has run away with a young chap and ..'

In sudden exasperation M. Grandvalet rose to his feet; but, at a peremptory wave of the hand from the inspector, sat down again

'There's one thing,' he said gravely, 'which I want to make quite clear. I am not laying a complaint. On no account must proceedings of any kind be taken against this young man. You may not understand my reasons . '

The inspector made a gesture indicating that he fully understood them; then, his pipe in his mouth, turned to his ex-colleague.

'What sort of a chap?'

'A clerk in the Municipal Office at Nevers. When he learnt that this gentleman' – he pointed to M. Grandvalet – 'had told his daughter to have nothing more to do with him, he started acting silly. He's only twenty-two, and a hot-headed young fool, I'm told.'

M. Grandvalet was fidgeting in his chair. Though he heard quite well what was being said, he could hardly believe it had any reference to the domestic tragedy which had brought him to Paris. The inspector was twiddling a match-box on the desk, smoke curling up from his pipe.

'Have they been long in Paris?'

'Nearly three weeks.'

'Had the young fellow any money with him?'

'Not much, anyhow.'

'Any friends or relatives in Paris?'

'Not that we know of.'

Neither took any notice of M. Grandvalet. They were exchanging remarks in a casual tone, like old friends discussing an incident of no great interest.

'What about the girl?'

'Seventeen. A minor. But my client doesn't want to prosecute. He's afraid his daughter might kill herself.'

All he wants is to find out where she is and have a talk with her.'

M. Grandvalet leant forward

'Let me explain,' he began. But he found nothing to say. Inspector Jusseume was puffing at his pipe, gazing at him thoughtfully.

'Do you expect to persuade her to come back with you?' he asked.

'Really I've no idea. She's a mere child, you know — young for her age. She didn't realize what she was doing. Perhaps, if I could make her understand . . '

M. Émile broke in, as if all this had no interest.

'Needless to say, I started by looking for them in the dance-halls, but —'

'Pure waste of time!' M. Grandvalet interjected almost angrily. 'My daughter would never dream of going to such places.'

Again he saw they weren't listening. Apparently nothing he said carried any weight; indeed they hardly seemed aware that he was in the room. The enquiry agent drew from his pocket the wad of papers he always had there, thumbed through them for the photograph, and handed it to the inspector.

He gave it a perfunctory glance, then dropped it carelessly amongst the files and documents littering his table. At the same time he pressed an electric bell-push. An attendant entered, and he said :

'Ask Lucas to come up.' He went on talking, as if to himself. 'If they hadn't much cash when they came here, the odds are they put up in a cheap hotel. That narrows it down a bit. But of course the young man may have registered under a false name. Is he the sort of chap who'd do that, in your opinion?'

M. Grandvalet was at a loss. His companion came to the rescue.

'From what my client tells me, I should say he's an impulsive young fellow, not the artful sort at all. Otherwise he wouldn't have done the damn-fool things he has.'

Inspector Lucas came in, glanced at the visitors and shook hands with his colleague

'Will you give us a hand, Lucas? This gentleman is trying to trace his daughter, who ran away three weeks ago with a young man called ..'

He paused and glanced enquiringly at M Grandvalet, who said after a slight hesitation :

'Bachelin Jules Bachelin.'

'He's pretty sure the young couple are somewhere in Paris Treat it as a non-official investigation This gentleman will pay the expenses, if any It's a family matter and he doesn't want any publicity You might look up your records and see if you can help him '

'Right-o.'

That was all. M. Grandvalet was shocked at the light-heartedness, not to say flippancy, with which the police officers were discussing a young girl's tragedy – as if it were an everyday occurrence But, he reflected, perhaps it wasn't really heartlessness; like doctors, they were inured to contact with the seamy side of life He heard the inspector say :

'Go down with Lucas. If you get on the track of anything, come up and see me again.'

M. Grandvalet followed Lucas out. He hadn't been given time to thank Inspector Jusseume, or even say *Au revoir*. After walking down a flight of stairs he was led into the big record-room he had noticed on his way up. Mugs of beer stood on the central table.

'What date exactly?'

He didn't realize that he was being addressed, and it took him some time to collect his wits.

'Let's see ... The twenty-eighth. The twenty-eighth of December.'

'Won't you sit down? It may take some time.'

Through the window he could see a long queue outside the Children's Court.

Three of the staff settled down to the job and M. Émile gave a hand, poring over lists of names and mumbling them aloud.

'Had they any money?'

'Very little, I believe.'

'Good! That'll make it easier.'

M. Grandvalet was getting tired of being asked that question; he clicked his fingers irritably. It was all very well for these policemen to gloat over the poverty of the young fugitives, but ... He lost himself in a maze of melancholy speculations. His eyes roved from one object in the room to another, and in his brown study he was conscious of the faintest sounds, the muffled conversations in a neighbouring room where records were still piling up for classification.

'Nothing in Districts I to V.'

'Try IX. That's the likeliest.'

To think that his wife had written advising him to consult a priest! .. His chair was too near the stove, his head was swimming with the heat. In a sort of dream he heard Lucas ask in a low voice:

'Anyhow, he won't make a rough house of it, will he?'

M. Émile's only answer was a loud guffaw.

It had struck twelve and members of the staff were leaving. There was still a crowd outside the Children's Court.

'Mechelin, is that it?' someone asked from an adjoining room.

'No, Bachelin.'

'Damn!'

Nearly half an hour passed before a clerk in a black, smock-like office-coat came up to Lucas and handed him a slip of paper. M. Grandvalet was in a flutter of impatience as the inspector perused it carefully, in silence.

'Is your daughter's name Juliette?'

'Yes. Tell me '

'Age, seventeen. Born at Nevers. No occupation. And your Christian names are Jerome Joseph. That correct?'

Bending over his colleague's shoulder, M. Emile was reading the slip of paper.

'They took a room on December 29 at the *Hôtel Beausite*, Rue des Dames.'

Picking up his hat, M. Grandvalet asked eagerly :

'And are they still there?'

'I doubt it. Their names appear on the register for the following week, but . . . Guignolet, bring me the lists for the whole of District XVIII for this week ' After examining them he added 'No. They've moved, it seems.'

'Anyhow, it's a start,' said M. Émile cheerfully, putting on his hat and shaking the inspector's hand 'You might tell Jusseume I'm going there at once and will be back this afternoon ... You never can tell!'

The intense cold outside gave M. Grandvalet quite a shock, and for a moment he thought he was going to faint. Misinterpreting his pallor, the enquiry agent tried to cheer him up.

'Come, come, it's not so bad as that. Now we've got something definite to go on, I shall be very much surprised if we don't lay hands on our young people within the next few hours. ... Ah, there's a taxi. Hop in. Driver, stop at the corner of the Rue des Dames and the Boulevard des Batignolles.'

On the way, however, he got out at the *café-tabac* on the pretext that his tobacco-pouch was empty. Actually he went to the bar-counter and had a drink. By now M.

Grandvalet's one desire was to shake off his companion, and when M. Émile came back to the taxi he suggested nervously :

'I've been thinking ... Suppose we leave it till this evening?'

'Why? You needn't worry about my lunch, you know; I'm used to eating at all hours '

'But if they saw us coming they might take fright and . . '

'Oh, there's no risk of that. It's obvious they feel quite safe; they didn't even trouble to sign the Visitors' Book with false names. They're much too busy making love, I should say, to trouble about other people's doings.' He tapped the window behind the driver's back and added : 'We'll get out here. . Give him eight francs fifty.'

M Grandvalet was the first to detect the inscription '*Hôtel Beausite*' above a narrow entrance M Émile took the lead and walked briskly into the little office, keeping his hat on as usual

'Is Monsieur Bachelin in?' he asked a fat woman who emerged from the kitchen, where four or five people were having a meal.

'No, he ain't in. . He's left the hotel '

'His wife too? Didn't they give you their new address?'

'Not likely. I chucked 'em out, if you must know it. And a good riddance. They owed me a week's lodging '

'How long is it since they left?'

'Let's see now. Four days. It was a Sunday morning. The place was full up and there was a gent wanting a room by the month.'

'Thank you.'

The enquiry agent shepherded M. Grandvalet into the street.

'It's going fine!' he chuckled, rubbing his hands. 'Give me another forty-eight hours and I promise you I'll

nab our little love-birds. You'll be going back to your hotel, won't you? I'll drop in this evening for a chat.'

They parted in the Boulevard, where M. Émile took a bus. M. Grandvalet, who had had nothing to eat since the early morning, was feeling quite exhausted; nevertheless, instead of going to his hotel or visiting a restaurant, he made his way slowly back to the Rue des Dames, his shoulders sagging, his eyes bent on the pavement. Before entering the hotel he took a fifty-franc note from his wallet and held it ready in his hand.

The manageress didn't even recognize him.

'Do you want a room, sir?'

'No. I should be much obliged ..' Awkwardly he laid the money on the table. 'I should be much obliged if you would let me know some more about that young man, Bachelin, and ...'

'How silly of me! Of course it was you who were here just now with that fat gent. What do you want to know, exactly?'

The door between them and the kitchen was open, and the people there – they were still at table – could hear every word.

'Can I have a look at their room?'

The woman glanced at a row of keys hanging on the key-rack.

'Yes, the man who has it now is out. Come along.'

It was a tiresome climb up the four flights of stairs; cleaning operations were in progress and the landings cluttered up with brooms and pails and stacks of soiled linen. The manageress was quite out of breath when they reached the room.

'It's the young lady you want to know about, isn't it?' she panted. 'A nice young thing she was, and I felt sorry for her when I put them out. But there! One can't always do as one would like, can one, sir?'

She opened the door. A coat and trousers sprawled on the bed, a razor and a stick of shaving-soap lay on the dressing-table.

'You can see for yourself, sir. It ain't a big room, but it's nice and clean – I'll say that for it. You saw the notice downstairs – didn't you? – telling people not to cook or wash their things in the bedrooms. Of course we don't say nothing if they only have a cold snack, though that makes a mess too. But those two, after they'd been here only two days, started cooking on a spirit-lamp.' She pointed to a brown patch on the table-cloth. 'That's *their* work, that burn. The young lady hadn't a change of clothes and she used to wash her things in the basin ... Anything else you'd like to know, sir?'

M. Grandvalet said the first thing that came into his head.

'Were they ... short of money? Hadn't the young man a job?'

'That I couldn't say. He didn't keep regular hours – so it looks as if he hadn't anything settled-like, don't it? But he was a close one, he never had much to say about himself.'

'Did they go out together?'

'Not much. The young lady went out in the morning for her marketing. I told her which were the cheapest shops.'

'How about the afternoons?'

'Well, I think she slept most afternoons. Often, when I came to do the room, I found her lying on the bed with all her clothes on. Sometimes in the evening they went out for a stroll together, arm in arm.'

'Did they ... did they seem to get on well together?'

'Well, you know, sir, I've fifty people staying here. There's always noises going on and one gets not to notice 'em. Listen! That's the couple in Number Twenty-four

jangling away as per usual. Now that I come to think of it, I remember her eyes were that red one morning that I asked her if she'd caught a cold. She said "No", so I guessed she'd been crying ... I think we'd better be going, sir. The gent as has this room will be back any minute.'

But M. Grandvalet lingered on, as if bent on fixing on his memory every detail of the ugly little bedroom. Now that his attention had been drawn to it, he could clearly hear a quarrel going on in the adjoining room.

'Had she a good coat, anyhow?'

'Yes, a green one. It wasn't much to look at, but the material was fairly thick.'

'Did she . . .?'

No, he'd asked quite enough questions. The more she told him, the more wretched he felt. The woman locked the door and tramped heavily down the stairs.

'Wasn't it silly of me? When you came I imagined something quite different. Now I understand; she's your daughter, ain't she?'

He made no reply, he hadn't even heard what she said. Encouraged by his silence, the woman became expansive.

'At her age, you know, it really don't amount to much. The girls nowadays, they're all like that, why, if I told you some of the things I've seen with my own eyes in this hotel - you'd never believe it! Anyhow, if I were you, sir, I wouldn't take it too hard; you'll see, it'll all come right in the end. It always does.'

He fumbled awkwardly in his pocket for another fifty-franc note, but couldn't find it in time. They had reached the door leading out into the street. As he pushed it open he murmured:

'Thank you. I'm much obliged. ..'

He had only the vaguest idea of the lay-out of the city and this district was quite unfamiliar. But he had an im-

pression of being at a vast distance from the *Hôtel du Centre*, where his place was laid in the homely little restaurant, his napkin waiting in a boxwood ring, a cream-jug standing on a plate beside a dessert-bowl heaped with figs, nuts, almonds, and the small bitter oranges he never ate — and, at the next table, that woman in mourning whose eyes, too, were red with weeping

He could drag himself no farther. Sick in mind and body, he sank on to a stone bench under one of the trees beside the Boulevard, and watched in blank amazement the endless stream of people surging down the entrance of a Metro station.

v

‘You see I *was* right after all!’

‘That’s so,’ said Philippe Grandvalet, and told his father how Hélène had assured him she had seen Juliette one morning, in the Rue Caulaincourt when she was out shopping.

‘Yes,’ Hélène smiled complacently, ‘I don’t often make mistakes’

She was laying the table, in their flat in the Rue Caulaincourt. Little by little M Grandvalet had come out with his story, while his son nodded understandingly from time to time and Hélène listened eagerly to every word as she moved to and fro between the dining-room and the kitchen.

‘When I told Philippe she hadn’t a hat on, he said it couldn’t possibly have been his sister.’

‘Well, I must say it wasn’t like her, going out without a hat. When she was twelve she used to spend hours titivating in front of the glass, trying different ways of doing her hair. Mother had quite a struggle getting her to go to school in pigtails like the other girls.’

The flat was very spick and span. Hélène had put to bed her ten-months-old baby in an adjoining room, the door of which was left ajar. Both the children were boys, and the elder, who was three, was perched on his grandfather's knee, gazing at him with big, wondering eyes.

'You'll stay to dinner, Father, won't you?'

M. Grandvalet always felt slightly embarrassed when his daughter-in-law addressed him thus. Really he hardly knew her. Philippe had made her acquaintance at Paris, the marriage had taken place there, and she had paid only flying visits to Nevers.

Hélène was quite a pleasant young woman, but rather lackadaisical, and M. Grandvalet suspected that she was partly to blame for the changes that had come over Philippe since his marriage. His apathy, his tendency to run to fat. He was a tall young man with a long, equine face and indeterminate features.

'Was Juliette by herself?' M. Grandvalet asked.

'Yes. She was coming out of the grocer's at the corner of the Place Constantin-Pecqueur. She was wearing a greenish coat that made her look a sight, and I'm pretty sure she had slippers on. As I was in the bus I had no chance of speaking to her.'

They took their places for dinner, the small boy insisting on sitting beside his grandfather. Hélène kept getting up to fetch things from the kitchen.

'So you've notified the bank that you're resigning your post?' said Philippe to his father, as he helped his son to soup.

'In any case, I was going to retire next year.'

'Will it make much difference to your pension?'

M. Grandvalet blushed slightly, and took a spoonful of soup before replying.

'Not much difference. A matter of a few francs a month.'

The cooking wasn't what he was used to at home, nor was the lighting. Even the smell of the flat was different.

'Do you think Juliette will stick to that young scamp?' Philippe spoke quite calmly; indeed, there was an undertone of satisfaction in his voice when he continued. 'I'm not a bit surprised at what has happened. Juliette was a shockingly spoilt child and I knew you'd have trouble with her one day or other. But you, of course, always took her part, and when she did something wrong it was I who got the blame. Do you remember that trick she played with the cupboard?'

M. Grandvalet lowered his eyes, perhaps to hide his emotion, while Philippe explained the allusion to his wife.

'My sister must have been seven or eight when it happened. She'd done something wrong – I forget what it was exactly.'

'She'd drawn pictures in pen-and-ink on the dining-room wall,' her father put in.

'Yes, I remember now. Well, Mother told her if she did it again she'd be locked up in the cupboard as a punishment. In those days we were living in an old house near the station and there was a big cupboard at the far end of the drawing-room.'

The ghost of a smile hovered on M. Grandvalet's lips. The child beside him was drinking in every word.

'That evening when dinner-time came Juliette wasn't to be found, and when we called she didn't answer. We hunted for her high and low, and – what do you think? – we finally discovered her in the cupboard with her toys spread out round her. And the wallpaper in the dining-room was scrawled all over, as high as she could reach.'

Hélène glanced meaningly at her husband, then at her son – to remind the former that the child was listening.

He paused for a moment, but the impulse to go on talking about Juliette's misdeeds was too strong.

'And that business with the needle!'

'What?' exclaimed his father. 'You remember that too?'

'Juliette was playing with a needle. Suddenly she started coughing and choking till she was almost black in the face. When we asked her if she'd swallowed the needle she wouldn't answer, but the needle had disappeared. The doctor was called in. At eleven at night my sister was rushed off to hospital and X-rayed. Nothing would persuade her to say a word, but she was obviously thrilled by all the commotion that was going on. My mother was in tears, and Father had a heart-attack – in fact, the doctor had to make him lie flat on the floor. And, of course, Juliette hadn't swallowed the needle at all; it was all a piece of play-acting!'

'Well I never!' H       exclaimed indignantly. 'Fancy a child of her age doing a thing like that! How old did you say she was then?'

'Nine or ten, as far as I remember. Another trick of hers was to threaten she'd get Father to spank me when I wouldn't do what she wanted. I remember once . . .'

His wife scowled at him, pointing to the child, and this time he let himself be hushed up.

An hour later the small boy had been put to bed and Philippe was yawning in an armchair while H       darned her son's socks. Up to the very last moment M. Grandvalet had been hoping for something he could hardly have stated in so many words – some show of emotion or sympathy on the part of his son and daughter-in-law, a consoling word or gesture. Nothing of the kind had been vouchsafed.

Not that their reception of him had been anything but cordial. They had opened a bottle of excellent wine, and

Hélène had even volunteered to run down for a bottle of old brandy. Nevertheless, on leaving the flat he felt even more depressed than he had been on entering it.

It was almost a relief to be back in the shrill confusion of the streets and walking slowly down towards the Montmartre Boulevards. He had quite overcome his nervousness, and indeed got into the way of seeking out the places where the crowd was thickest, the streets ablaze with neon lights, and one had to thread one's way precariously at crossings between taxis, buses and private cars.

Several times he had deliberately missed meals at the hotel, and the manageress had taken to eyeing him with pained reproach.

'The manager asked me to call in at the bank,' wrote Mme Grandvalet, 'and told me how sorry he was to learn of your decision to retire. But he quite appreciates the motives set forth in your letter. He gave me an envelope containing a full year's salary. Please write and tell me if you wish the whole sum to be sent you, or if I should pay some of it into our account. The weather is still very cold. The man with the squint a few doors off died the day before yesterday. I do hope you will come back soon ...'

He slept badly that night, as M. Émile had told him over the phone that he would probably have some interesting news to impart on the following day and concluded by saying. 'I'll come to see you in the course of the morning; don't leave the hotel, please.'

'But I should be going to the police office.'

'Don't bother about that!'

It had developed into a habit. Every morning M. Grandvalet walked along the bank of the Seine, crossed

by the Ile Saint-Louis and turned into the premises of the *Police Judiciaire*. When for the first time he knocked at the door of Lucas's office on the ground floor, he brought with him a carton containing two large cigars.

'I thought I might as well look in to hear if you have any news for me. ... Do you smoke?'

He held out the carton to the inspector, and gave the other cigar to a man at the next table. They made a hasty examination of the latest Visitors' Lists from the hotels.

'Nothing so far. ... Perhaps they're not staying now at an hotel.'

On the following day he returned, and had felt called on to bring two more cigars. And now it was a daily routine. The police officers knew his knock, the exact time to expect him. They knew, too, that he preferred to inspect the lists himself, just to make quite sure. If by any chance Inspector Lucas had to go out, he would say to his colleague 'Put my cigar in the drawer, please.'

A whole week had passed without any sign of life from M. Émile, until this morning, when he turned up at nine, looking very pleased with himself.

'Good news!' he announced gleefully as he entered the restaurant. 'I've found the trail again.'

M. Grandvalet put his finger to his lips, to make him drop his voice. The lady in mourning was at the next table; her son had died in a nursing-home the day before. Everybody at the hotel was talking in whispers, moving as quietly as possible.

'Put on your overcoat. We've a job of work before us.'

'Where are they?' M. Grandvalet asked, once they were in the taxi.

'I can't tell you where they are now. But I've found out where they were three days ago, and I'd like you to be present when I put some questions to the people they were staying with.'

So only three days previously Juliette had been in Paris, perhaps in one of the streets in which her father had walked, where they might easily have met!

'Somewhere in the Montmartre district, isn't it?'

'How do you know?'

'My daughter-in-law, who lives in that part of Paris, fancied she saw her one morning in the Rue Caulaincourt, but couldn't believe her eyes.'

The taxi climbed the steep incline of the Rue Lepic, crossed the Place du Tertre, and halted behind the Sacré-Cœur basilica. Sparkling with hoar-frost, the streets were almost empty at this hour. The window of a pork-butcher's shop was white with frost-flowers and all the vegetables in baskets outside a greengrocer's were frozen.

'Wait here,' said M. Émile to the taximan. 'You'll have time for a short one at the pub over there.'

He led M. Grandvalet into a large yard, which seemed as out of place in Paris as it would have been in a provincial town, or even in the country. Probably, in former days, when Montmartre was a wooded hillside, this had been a farmyard, but the buildings round it, stables, barns, and cowsheds, had been joined up and partially rebuilt, and now contained apartments and artists' studios. Holes in the walls had been enlarged for windows, and from stove-pipes protruding through the ramshackle roofs smoke was curling up in the grey wintry light.

The portico was so jammed up with dustbins waiting to be cleared that it was all they could do to squeeze past between them and the wall.

'At the top of the stairs,' said M. Émile to his companion, who was in front.

This part of the building had, for no apparent reason, been provided with an upper floor, and a flight of open steps, that seemed to have been put in as an afterthought,

led up to it. At the top of the steps was a glass-panelled door, but a yellow curtain prevented one from seeing into the room. A knock at the door gave no result, and M Grandvalet said :

‘Are you sure this is the place?’

‘Quite sure. Knock again’

At last a woman’s voice came from inside.

‘Who’s there?’

A finger drew back the curtain a cautious inch; an eye came into view. M. Emile pushed forward.

‘Sorry to trouble you, Madame, but we want to get some information.’

‘Whom do you want to see?’

‘Madame Leroy’

A key turned, and as the door opened a rush of warm air fanned their cheeks, for a big stove was roaring in the middle of the room. A smell of varnish hovered in the air.

‘Come in. Please don’t take any notice of the room; I’m afraid it’s in a shocking mess.’

‘Well, anyhow, you keep yourself nice and warm,’ said M Emile cheerfully. Following his invariable practice, he had kept his hat on and was taking stock of all the objects in the room.

M Grandvalet bowed politely to the young woman, who was obviously embarrassed and shyly trying to conceal with her apron the signs that she was shortly to be a mother.

She cleared two chairs of the parchment lampshades stacked on them, and said :

‘Sit down, won’t you?’

There were lampshades everywhere, on the settee and on the floor; others, painted with flowers, were drying on a rack beside the stove.

‘You must excuse me for not opening at once. I was busy with my lampshades, as you see.’

'And very pretty they are!' said M. Émile familiarly. 'They're all the rage nowadays; one sees them everywhere. I suppose you make quite a good thing out of it, don't you?'

She gave no answer. She was looking anxiously round the room to make sure that nothing unseemly was visible. Noticing a wash-stand protruding from behind a screen, she pushed it back with her foot.

'You will understand why we have called when I tell you that the gentleman with me is the father of your young friend.'

She had already realized that there was nothing in common between M. Grandvalet and the fat little man accompanying him, who at last thought fit to remove his hat — but only because he was beginning to perspire.

M. Grandvalet, however, felt on an easy footing with the young woman, who might well have been a niece or cousin of his, or one of his wife's friends. She had the same way of getting flustered when visitors came, dreading that she might fail in her duties as a hostess. She wore the same amiable smile, and like his wife kept glancing at a mirror to make sure her hair was in order.

'I'm so sorry, but my husband has just gone out ... It's impossible to keep the place tidy when I'm at work, what with the paints and varnishes and the rest of it. You understand, don't you?'

She was watching M. Grandvalet from the corner of an eye and it was plain that she was nervous, dreading the questions that were coming.

'Juliette and her friend stayed here for some days, didn't they?' said M. Émile as he seated himself not on a chair but on the edge of the settee.

She said nothing, but made a slight movement of her head that might have been a nod. M. Grandvalet, too, had sat down; there was so little free space that, standing,

he had an impression of crowding up the room still more.

He could see that, though primarily a work-room, it was also a place in which people lived, had meals, and slept. On a small table were the remains of two breakfasts, and the wash-stand had shown that the screened-off corner was used as a dressing-room.

The settee served as a bed by night. Looking towards the window, he saw another bed or, rather, a mattress laid on the floor and covered with a rug.

'Is that where they slept?' he asked.

The young woman nodded again; then, noticing the pained look on her visitor's face, added hastily. 'At night we put the screen across the middle of the studio.'

M. Émile thought it best to explain.

'Let me put your mind at rest. Monsieur Grandvalet has no intention of taking any action against his daughter. It would be a bit late in the day anyhow, considering how things stand. .. Now will you please tell us how you came to know them?'

At last she sat down. She seemed to be in ill-health, but perhaps this was due to her approaching motherhood.

'I've been going out very little lately, especially since it turned so cold. It was my husband who met them, in a café, and brought them here one evening.'

M. Grandvalet was about to speak, but the enquiry agent gave him a glance that meant: 'Leave it to me.'

Aloud he said:

'They were pretty short, weren't they? I mean, the young man had run through his money?'

'Well, I gathered that they weren't at all well off.'

'They'd just been chucked out of their hotel. So your husband took pity on them and gave them shelter here. That right?'

She would not look at him, and kept her eyes on M Grandvalet. But M Émile was determined to parade his competence as a sleuth.

'Unless I'm much mistaken, your husband was an army officer and lost a leg in the war.'

'How did you find that out?'

'I know a great deal more than you think. ... I know, too, that his present job is bill-sticking – mostly in the Montmartre cafés, as he has difficulty in getting about. And it's a job that necessitates his drinking. ...'

She flushed, and staring at the yellow window-curtains, retorted.

'Well, and why shouldn't he if he wants to? It's not a crime. Anyhow, he has the kindest heart of anyone I've ever known. When he met Bachelin and Juliette and found that they had nowhere to sleep, he didn't hesitate to bring them here.'

'Bachelin helped my husband at his work, and Juliette set to painting lampshades. She picked it up very quickly, and after a week was turning out more than I was. To make one's living at it one has to turn out at least twenty a day.'

M Grandvalet didn't seem to be listening. He was looking round him, no corner of the room escaped his observation. Suddenly, in a stack of lampshades, he noticed one whose decoration consisted of some bars of music. He sprang to his feet, exclaiming.

'I'm sure that's Juliette's work!'

'Yes. She had some trouble with flowers; you need a special knack for them. So she invented her own designs.'

Too shy to pick up the lampshade and examine it closely, M. Grandvalet merely gazed at it with obvious emotion. M. Émile spoke again.

'How many days exactly is it since they left you?'

'Four. They went last Monday.'

'Was Bachelin still working with your husband?'

She hesitated.

'I believe he'd got another job.'

'What sort of job?'

'I'm afraid I don't know.'

'Had he any money?'

'The last day he was here he certainly had some. I couldn't say how much. Two or three hundred francs, perhaps.'

The enquiry agent was bubbling over with satisfaction, whereas M. Grandvalet feigned detachment and was now examining a little plaster statuette.

'Bachelin quarrelled with your husband, didn't he?'

The question seemed to distress Mme Leroy and she looked almost beseechingly at M. Grandvalet.

'Well, I hardly know what to say. Of course Bachelin is a terribly sensitive young fellow. More so even than my husband, who's like that only because of his leg. He's one of those unfortunate people who imagine that everybody's against them, and take offence where none is meant. But really he has quite a nice disposition — if you take him the right way. You could see how upset he was if he thought Juliette was feeling low. One morning I found him in tears because he'd had a drop too much the night before and Juliette had refused to kiss him.'

Again she looked at M. Grandvalet as if hoping to get some encouragement from him, but he had averted his head and she could only see his ears — which were crimson.

'When two men who're so touchy work together, they're bound to get on each other's nerves at times, aren't they?'

She rose from her seat and, when putting some more coal in the stove, forgot to hide her condition with her apron, as she had done till now.

'And he has brains,' she added. 'I'm sure he'll find a job.'

'What was the row about?' asked M. Émile, who was nothing if not persistent.

'Oh, it was so silly that I don't know how to explain it. I'd had a letter from my mother ..'

'She's not in Paris, then?'

'No, she lives at Nancy. She's a widow.'

M. Grandvalet pictured that mother very well – an elderly lady of the type of Mme Grandvalet, with a small income, living in a flat at Nancy – and he could have sworn that she had no idea that her daughter was reduced to painting lampshades to keep a roof over her head.

'Well, what happened when you got that letter?'

'I read it out. Juliette went and sat on the sofa. After a moment Bachelin went and joined her, and they talked in whispers for quite a while. Then suddenly he jumped to his feet in a blazing rage. He had that nasty look in his eyes he gets when something's crossed him; only it was even worse than usual, in fact I was quite scared. I could guess what had happened. Juliette had been crying and he'd started saying it was our fault; that we were egging her on to give him up, talking to her about her family and the nice home she'd left, and ..'

She stopped abruptly. Though M. Grandvalet had made no movement, she had an impression of having let her tongue run away with her. After a short silence she added lamely :

'And then he made her go away with him.'

'Did she cry often?' M. Émile enquired.

'No, that was the only time.'

'She didn't confide in you? I mean, she didn't tell you how she felt about it all?'

'Oh, she never had much to say for herself. Sometimes

we worked together for hours on end without her saying a word.'

'Did she seem sorry for having acted as she had done?'

The young woman pondered for some moments. Then she answered gravely.

'No, I can't say that. In my opinion Juliette isn't the sort of girl to feel remorse. Or, if she did, she wouldn't let it show.'

M. Grandvalet had gone to the window and was gazing out at the yard. Now he turned and asked.

'I suppose she did the marketing?'

'Yes, quite often. She didn't seem to like my going out — in my present condition.' She blushed so violently that M. Émile once again signed to his companion not to speak. Then in a casual tone he said

'And who paid — if I may enquire?'

'We shared expenses.'

'Tell me, do you run accounts with any of the shops in your street?'

The young woman seemed on the brink of tears, but M. Émile refused to be put off.

'I see. You were given credit. At what shops?'

'The butcher's and the grocer's.'

'When Bachelin left, did he settle his bills?'

M. Grandvalet, whose eyes were now fixed on the stove, heard a faintly murmured:

'I ... I don't know.'

'Excuse me, you know quite well. They didn't pay their bills. And I wouldn't mind betting your husband's furious about it.'

'They forgot, I expect,' she sighed.

'Can't you make any suggestion that would help us to find them? Do you know, for instance, the cafés that Bachelin usually patronizes?'

'All I know is that he used to meet people at a *brasserie*

in the Place de la République. ... Oh, I'm so sorry! I forgot to ask if you'd have something to drink.'

Brushing aside their protestations, she produced a bottle of red wine and, after wiping them, filled two thick glasses.

'Anyhow, I hope things will come right for them,' she said 'Juliette deserves it, and I think he deserves it too.'

His eyes half closed, M Grandvalet conjured up a picture of the room as it had appeared at night, bisected by the screen, and the two couples on either side of it, talking in undertones while the stove roared cheerfully away.

Out of politeness he took a sip of the red wine, but it was so harsh that one sip was enough M Émile, however, drank off his glass at a gulp. After that he rose and, casting a glance at the young woman's figure, asked: 'When's it to be?'

'Early next month. .. And I was so pleased to think I'd have a woman-friend with me when the time came!'

'Haven't you let your mother know?'

She hung her head; M. Grandvalet guessed that she had not. He understood. And now he was eager to get away. He'd have liked to leave a small present, but lacked the courage. However, he brought himself to say:

'Might I come again?'

'I'm always in.'

As they were walking down the steps M Émile looked back and saw the young woman watching them from the doorway 'Don't stand there, my dear,' he shouted back 'You'll catch a cold.' He was in high good-humour, and as he led the way across the street to a small corner café he said with a chuckle: 'They'll have something to tell us, I'm pretty sure. Just you see how I go about it!'

They found their taximan there, leaning on the bar with a steaming glass of wine before him.

'Two Pernods,' the enquiry agent said, giving a nudge to his companion, who frowned at the man's assumption that he drank that particularly potent *apéritif*

It was a long, narrow room, a step below street-level. On the tables were paper table-cloths, and a half-bottle of red wine stood beside each place. The menu was written on a slate hung just inside the entrance.

M. Émile leant across the counter towards the proprietor of the café, who was pouring out the Pernods, and asked point-blank

'Has Bachelin been here lately?'

'Bachelin? Oh, you mean that young chap who was staying with the Leroys over the way.' He stopped abruptly, and the look on his face conveyed that it was a sore subject. 'What's he been up to now?'

The man seemed on his guard and eyed his two customers dubiously. However, the appearance of M. Grandvalet, who certainly had no connexion with the police, reassured him.

'Did he do you in for much?' asked M. Émile.

'Round about two hundred and fifty francs. I suppose he bilked you too?'

'Yes, and several other folks I know. . . Do you mean to say you let him run up that much on the slate?'

'No, the drinks were only a bit of it. Fifty or sixty francs.'

By now M. Grandvalet was regretting he had let himself be inveigled into this rather sordid café. To keep himself in countenance he took a timid sip of the absinthe. Meanwhile M. Émile seemed to be trying to convey something to the man behind the counter, first giving him a wink, then casting a meaning glance at M. Grandvalet.

'So you know Bachelin. A nasty piece of work, eh?'

'Well, he is and he isn't, if you see what I mean. He's no fool, for one thing. And his heart's in the right place, I'll say that for him. You can see that when he's had a drink or two. Only he's fair crazy over that girl of his, and I guess he wouldn't stick at nothing to make her admire him. Of course he's a proper twister. He's diddled lots of people down our street. He has a way with him, you know. He had his dinner here one or two nights, and once he got talking, everybody in the place was listening and standing him drinks. And the folks I get here are singers from the cabarets, artists and such-like – they know what's what.'

'What about those two hundred francs he owes you – not for drinks?'

The man hesitated. Obviously he was afraid of putting his foot in it. After another look at M. Grandvalet he shrugged his shoulders and said

'Oh, it was a neat trick. He told me the tale all right. He said he'd had a wire from his father-in-law to say he was coming to Paris, and he wanted to put up a decent show for the old man. Two hundred francs would see him through, he said, it'd pay for dinner at a first-class restaurant and a night at a posh hotel.'

M. Émile guffawed and thumped the counter gleefully. By now the taximan had guessed who M. Grandvalet was, and he turned his head to hide a grin.

'Let's be going,' M. Grandvalet whispered uneasily.

'Have a drink with us, landlord! ... Yes, as you say, it was a smart trick. And quite likely he'll turn up again one of these days with another yarn up his sleeve – I wouldn't put it past him!'

There was a sound of footsteps in the street outside – steps with a curious rhythm. The proprietor looked up quickly, putting a finger to his lips.

‘Mum’s the word. No more about that now.’

The strangeness of the footsteps was due to the fact that the customer who now entered had a wooden leg. He was a man of about forty, decently dressed, and wearing the rosette of the Legion of Honour in his lapel. He had a lean face, clean-cut features, a tracery of tiny, tremulous wrinkles under the eyes. Taking no notice of the others, he planted his elbows on the counter.

‘A Pernod, Léon.’

While he was drinking, the landlord opened a tattered note-book, fluttered the pages, and made another entry on a page already covered with figures.

‘Let’s be off.’ This time M. Grandvalet’s tone was imperative.

He could stand no more of it – not today anyhow. Though he had taken only a sip of his drink, it had been enough to make him feel quite sick. He paid, forgot about the taxi-driver’s drink, and had to come back to settle for it.

The one-legged man, already half-seas over, gave him a hazy stare.

‘Really we should have stayed there for lunch,’ said M. Émile, once they were back in the taxi. ‘I’m convinced we’d have picked up some useful information. By the way, do you want to call at the police office?’

‘Not today.’

‘You’ll see! I’ll be on the trail of our young runaways in no time now. That woman’s remark about the Place de la République has told me where to look. .. Driver, I’m getting out here.’

M. Grandvalet had promised to lunch with his son; but he didn’t feel up to it, and told the taximan to take him back to his hotel.

As they were crossing the Place de la République his

attention was caught by the gaudy façadès of the big *brasseries*, and his heart beat faster. The square was only five minutes' walk from the hotel, and quite possibly Juliette did her shopping in the small streets leading off it. Why shouldn't he run into her here one morning, as his daughter-in-law had done, in one of the Montmartre streets?

'Twenty-two francs, sir.'

While he was paying the driver it struck him that it was high time he asked his wife to send him some money. As it so happened a letter from her awaited him in the hotel office.

'My legs were so painful yesterday that I had to go to bed. I could hardly drag myself up the stairs. Luckily Mme Jamar dropped in to see me, and as her husband is still at Marseilles she has moved into our flat and is sleeping in Juliette's bed. She is kindness itself – but I do wish you would come back. I feel as if I had the whole weight of the place on my shoulders, with both you and Juliette away.'

He read the letter at his usual table beside the grotto. There were some new arrivals: three young Alsatians travelling under the auspices of a religious association, whose badge they wore in their buttonholes.

The lady in mourning was not at her table. M. Grandvalet ate what was set before him without looking at the menu. His wife's letter had vexed him; she knew quite well he didn't much care for Mme Jamar, a fat, blowsy woman who was always grumbling because her husband never brought presents to her when he came back from his business trips to various parts of France.

'I wouldn't mind how cheap it was,' she would lament. 'Only I do think he might bring back *something*!'

HIS thoughts switched abruptly to the needle that Juliette hadn't swallowed, and he pictured himself carrying her in his arms to the nursing-home in the middle of the night. They had wanted to postpone the X-ray examination to the following morning, but he wouldn't hear of it. To think that he'd believed Juliette to be unconscious when she was merely sound asleep!

And Philippe had thought fit to resuscitate that incident, and Juliette's other misdeed with the cupboard. Calmly, deliberately, he had retailed both stories to his wife, who, when one came to think of it, wasn't even a member of the family. Yes, it had been a mistake, going to see his son the previous evening.

VI

IT was the thirteenth of February. A transatlantic liner glided across the screen, made fast at the Havre wharf, and an American statesman was seen in close-up coming down the gangway – only to be effaced after a few seconds by a motor-race on the Italian Riviera.

Juliette had moved her chair to the back of the box. Thus she could study Bachelin's face, outlined against the brightness of the screen.

'Why are you watching me like that?' he asked, without looking round.

'I wasn't really watching you.'

Affection had nothing to do with it. Since her earliest days Juliette had had the habit of fixing people and objects, indifferently, with her gaze. At such moments a trance-like calm settled on her face, it grew tense and pale; indeed, her brother used to declare she had the Evil Eye.

The Saint-Paul picture-house was packed. The boxes were in front of the dress-circle, and Bachelin, as he

bent forward, one arm resting on the red-plush-covered ledge, seemed to be defying the crowd massed below.

For the pictures, music, and above all the sight of a crowded house had always a curious effect on him, and Juliette may have been studying this from her vantage-point behind. No sooner did he step into a cinema than his cheeks grew flushed, his manner more assured. When, for instance, he was gazing at the luxury liner with its thousand cabins, a hard, rapacious look had come into his eyes, as if he were bracing himself for a superhuman effort, and his lips curled in an almost malignant smile.

'Why don't you watch the picture?' There was a note of petulance in his voice.

The picture was a comedy, and now and again a ripple of laughter spread across the house. It was a Saturday, and the people in the rows of seats rising tier by tier behind the boxes were mostly of the working class. Now and then Juliette turned her head and watched for a moment the serried rows of faces lit by the backwash of brightness from the screen.

'Does it bore you?'

'Not at all.'

He shrugged his shoulders, then, resting his chin on his folded arm, gazed in front of him. It was always like that. Nothing interested her, nothing gave her pleasure. She merely looked on, listlessly, indifferently. No, that wasn't true. She *was* interested after her manner, but always in the 'wrong' things. Now, for instance, instead of watching the screen she was studying Bachelin's face, or the faces of the people in the auditorium.

The lights went up for the interval and there was a general move to the doors, where pass-outs were distributed.

'How about going down for a drink? I think I'll have one.'

'I'm not thirsty '

'Oh? Then you'll stay here, I suppose?'

That, too, was Juliette's way. She always stayed in her seat. She had never realized that more than half the interest in a show like this lay precisely in the thrill of mingling with a crowd, participating in its pleasures, its noisy animation.

'All right. I'll be back in a few minutes '

He had shaved off his beard and was wearing a new suit. He followed the crowd down the steps and turned into a buffet where beer and lemonade were being dispensed. The air reeked of tobacco-smoke and orange-peel. The swing-door opened and closed incessantly.

It was exactly what Bachelin wanted. A half-full glass in his hand, he stood amongst the others, holding himself very erect, scanning the faces of all these people he had never seen before with an almost truculent air. The scene of the picture he had been watching was laid in sporting circles, and all the young people in it had big high-powered cars. He leant over the bar and asked the girl

'How much is that?'

He was being jostled by a motley crowd, mostly from the humbler walks of life: hatless girls, men with mufflers round their necks, mothers with babies in their arms.

He walked to an exit with the idea of having a breath of fresh air, but hardly had he pushed open the thickly padded door than he drew back hastily, scowling.

He had just caught sight of a small, sparely built man, with a pale face and melancholy eyes, stationed in the portico amongst posters and stills from the pictures showing inside.

It was M. Grandvalet, waiting like the others for the interval to end. He was alone. He wasn't smoking. And Bachelin noticed that he was in mourning.

'What's the matter with you?' Juliette asked as he settled down beside her.

He was out of breath after running up the stairs. There was a curious shiftiness in his gaze, his nostrils were fluttering.

'There's nothing wrong with me.'

'Well, you look as if . . . as if you'd seen a ghost!'

She had moved her chair to the front of the box. As she was bending forward to gaze at the people in the stalls below, a bell started ringing in the vestibule, and the lights went out.

Bachelin whispered:

'Let's be off!'

A selection from an opera was being transmitted through concealed loud-speakers.

'But we've only seen half the show.'

There was an angry 'Ssh!' from a music-lover in one of the seats behind.

'I tell you I want you to come with me – immediately.'

He began putting on his coat and took Juliette's furs from the back of her chair. For she now owned a grey squirrel coat, for which they had paid twelve hundred francs.

Someone in the seats behind them bawled 'Sit down!'

Their footsteps echoed in the empty stairway. A minute later they were standing in the Rue Saint-Antoine, where only the cafés remained open.

Bachelin thrust his hands into his overcoat-pockets, and with the promptness of a familiar gesture Juliette linked her left arm in his right. She had to take two steps to his one, to keep level with him.

'What made you suddenly want to leave?' she asked.

'Oh, I don't know I was fed up with the pictures Shall we look up Van Lubbe on the way? What do you think?'

She did not reply at once They were in a dark, empty street that led out into the Place de la République, where the Belgian was to be found each evening, at the *Brasserie Nouvelle*

At last Juliette said with a slight sigh

'I'm rather tired I'd rather go straight home '

'You weren't feeling tired when you wanted to stay at the pictures,' he retorted surlily. His nerves were on edge, there was a glint of anger in his eyes

'Did you meet Van Lubbe again today?' she asked.

'And if I did - what about it?'

'You know I don't like that man.'

'You don't like anyone or anything that I like '

They were still walking, out of step, along the narrow pavement, their shadows following or preceding them according to the position of the nearest street-lamp Juliette had fallen silent again, and nothing irritated Bachelin more than these silences of hers, more telling than recriminations

'What have you got against Van Lubbe?'

'Everything!'

'I suppose you think that's a clever thing to say!'

Both of them knew, from previous experience, what was impending, and Juliette nerved herself for the inevitable scene Bachelin was fuming with rage

'Do you really want to go back to bed?'

They were living quite near, in the Rue du Pas-de-la-Mule.

'Don't bother about me. If you've absolutely got to see Van Lubbe . '

'I never said I'd absolutely got to see him ' Their foot-steps echoed in the empty street. After a moment he

added: 'If you had the responsibility of keeping the home together, you'd understand'

She sighed. She had heard it all before, and knew exactly what would follow.

'Why don't you answer?'

'You didn't ask me anything.'

'If it wasn't for Van Lubbe we'd be starving.'

'I know that.'

The glaring lights of the Place de la République made them blink. Defiantly Bachelin pushed open the door of the *brasserie*, and promptly glanced towards the corner table at which Van Lubbe always sat. There were two men there whom he didn't know, playing backgammon.

'Waiter! Hasn't Monsieur Van Lubbe come?'

'He's been and gone. He left a quarter of an hour ago.'

Bachelin shot a quick glance at Juliette, but her face was quite impassive.

'Shall I fetch you anything?' the waiter asked.

'No.'

They walked half the way home in silence. At last Bachelin remarked with a vague hope of mending matters:

'I had a special reason for wanting to see Van Lubbe tonight.'

No response.

'Didn't you hear what I said?'

'Yes, I heard.'

'Then why don't you say anything?'

'I've nothing to say.'

They were two unhappy people, and he was convinced he was the unhappier of the two. For one thing, he had all sorts of worries of which she had no idea. That fur coat, for instance; he had produced the money, and she had only to wear it, without further thought. Whereas he had always to be thinking, planning. ...

Van Lubbe's absence tonight, for instance, raised an anxious problem. Of course, it might mean nothing. But it might also spell disaster. He'd been a fool not to ask the waiter if the Belgian had gone out alone, or accompanied by strangers. Abruptly he asked:

'Has Van Lubbe ever made a pass at you?'

'Never.'

'He's never said anything, or hinted at anything of that sort?'

'I don't think the idea has ever entered his head.'

That fitted in well enough with the general impression produced by the Belgian. He looked about thirty-five. He was plump, affable, always smiling, hail-fellow-well-met with all and sundry. He had a great fund of stories, which he told with a rich Flemish accent that added to their piquancy. After five minutes' talk with a new acquaintance he would be slapping him on the back, calling him 'old boy', presenting him with odds and ends fished up from his capacious pockets.

'You've something at the back of your mind,' Bachelin grumbled. The squabble that had been broken off before its climax was still rankling.

'Don't be so absurd.'

'I'm not being absurd, and it's no good trying to throw dust in my eyes. Own up to it: you can't stick Van Lubbe. And, for one of those silly prejudices women get into their heads, you're always wanting to freeze him off. You know quite well, if we're not doing so badly now, it's thanks to him.'

'By the way,' she broke in, 'do you still want me to go and see that old woman tomorrow?'

That, too, was a sore point – as was proved by the sudden silence that fell on the man beside her. For some minutes there was no sound but their footfalls in the empty street. At last Bachelin said curtly:

'No, you needn't go. Neither to the old woman nor anywhere else.'

They were in the Rue du Pas-de-la-Mule. Bachelin rang the doorbell of a high, narrow block of flats, whose ground floor consisted of a greengrocer's shop. They went up three ill-lit flights of stairs.

'You've the key.'

Juliette took it from her bag. A gust of warm air greeted them as they stepped into a three-room flat, still only partially furnished. There being no curtains, sheets of paper were stretched across the windows.

Dropping his overcoat on the bed, Bachelin sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands. Juliette put some more coal in the stove, then went to the kitchen and ran the tap for some moments.

Some of the furniture was new, but a good deal had come from a second-hand dealer's shop in the neighbourhood of the Bastille. Nothing seemed to have been assigned its final place, and the only decorations on the walls were magazine pictures.

'What the devil are you up to?' Bachelin shouted irritably, hearing Juliette still moving about in the kitchen.

'Oh, nothing!'

That answer was enough to set him off; it was quite obvious she was doing something.

'Listen! Just now you mentioned the old woman ...'

She remained in the kitchen, and fell silent. After a while he heard her say quietly:

'Yes? I'm listening.'

'I'll talk to you when I see you; not before.'

Obediently she came back to the bedroom, looking very frail and slim in her black dress. Her hair was loose and she had a pair of curling-tongs in her hand.

'I suppose you want to tell me that I must go and see her, whether I like it or not. Very well, I'll go.'

'A beastly thing to ask, isn't it? And how right you are to take that meek, martyred air!' He went on in the same strain. Now he had started, he let himself go, thinking up the taunts that would hurt most and flinging them at her with a sort of brutal zest. Yet never in his life had he felt so depressed as he felt now.

Of course it was all her fault! She was unreasonable, she didn't even try to understand, she would do nothing to help! She thought she had done all he could want of her when she had given him a few caresses, been nice to him for a few minutes.

'I know quite well what it is. It's your damned snob-bishness. What you don't like is demeaning yourself by going to collect the money from that woman. Of course you can't help being like that, I suppose, it's the way you were brought up.'

But, in his heart of hearts, he knew this wasn't the explanation — not the whole explanation anyhow. There was something else, that neither of them ever openly alluded to. And it went back to before Van Lubbe's time. Soon after they moved from the Leroy's, Juliette had asked

'Have you settled our bills at the shops?'

He had answered 'yes', to have done with it. But one morning she stayed out longer than usual, and when she came home he asked her where she'd been.

'Oh, I went for a little walk.'

But she sounded dispirited, and there was less affection than usual in the look she gave him.

'Where did you go?'

'Montmartre way, if you must know.'

There had been a curious flicker in her eyes — and he understood. She had called at the butcher's, the baker's — and perhaps at the little restaurant as well. But he

thought best to let the subject drop, and neither he nor she had ever brought it up again

It was much the same thing as regards Van Lubbe Bachelin always spoke of the Belgian as a 'dealer', without specifying the nature of his business

'I act as his agent for the sale of various articles' And he had mentioned radio sets, typewriters, electric apparatus.

'Where's his shop?'

'Do you imagine that business in Paris is always done in shops?'

Actually Van Lubbe's business consisted of organized and large-scale swindling – as Bachelin had guessed from the outset. The Belgian obtained goods on two or three months' credit, and promptly disposed of them. The old woman of whom they had been speaking was one of Van Lubbe's receivers, and, under his instructions, Juliette had been deputed to visit her periodically and collect the money due on goods delivered.

'The great thing,' he had explained, 'is to avoid having the same faces seen there too often, and a girl's less noticeable than a man.'

She was still standing facing Bachelin, the curling-tongs in her hand

'Is that all you have to tell me?'

He gripped her wrist and dragged her towards him

'You hate me, don't you?'

'No'

That habit of hers, of answering with a bare 'Yes' or 'No' whenever possible, was another of his grievances

'Own up to it! If you had a chance of going back to your parents...'

From the moment they left the picture-house it had been a foregone conclusion the course their bickering

would take. The same things would be said, eliciting the same replies, the same reactions.

There seemed, indeed, to be a sort of fatality about it, and their sense of helplessness galled and humiliated them. Actually, however, neither made any serious attempt to break the vicious circle.

They were standing near the dressing-table, which Juliette had draped with a flowered cretonne. The bed was turned down, ready for the night. Bachelin, who was feeling hot, wrenched off his tie and collar, and flung them on the dressing-table.

'You've never really cared for me. Isn't that so?'

'I—I don't know.'

Around them was the hush of night, murmurous with the sounds of distant traffic.

'You won't lift a finger to help me, you won't give me a word of encouragement — though you know what a struggle it is to keep our heads above water. It's because, at bottom, you despise me.' He had grasped her shoulders and was shaking her roughly.

'You're hurting me.'

'Don't you realize that you hurt me far more — by the way you treat me?'

She was thinking of the picture-house and the expression on his face as he watched the news-reel, of the endless rows of spectators, amongst whom were hundreds of couples about their age.

'Did you hear what I said?'

She gave a start, and murmured. 'Yes, I heard.' Then timidly suggested 'How about going to bed?'

She was at his mercy, she knew that once again he was going to handle her roughly, to bruise her wrists, and everything she said would only make him still more violent.

'Yes, you're pining for your precious family, your

music-lessons, the concerts you used to go to with your father.'

She dropped the curling-tongs behind her on the table, fearing he would snatch them from her hand and hit her with them

'And I'm not good enough for you, of course I've no manners I'm a horrid little guttersnipe. My mother sells newspapers in the street.'

She made as if to sit down on the edge of the bed. Angrily he jerked her to her feet again

'Nothing I do makes any difference to you For months I've been slaving away, trying to give you a comfortable life, living for you in fact – and all I get in return is nothing!'

His voice broke in a sob The phase of recriminations was over He uttered a few more despairing words, then, resting his arm against the wall, pressed his head to it Tears were streaming down his cheeks

'Do let's go to bed, dear '

Uncertainly she laid her hand on his shoulder, but he pushed her away His body was shaken by sobs, he was muttering to himself, and now and again his voice rose to a scream In a paroxysm of rage and despair he began to beat the wall with his head

'You were right. I'd have done better just now to stay at the cinema.'

His stretched nerves were playing the traitor once again He knew he was about to make an irreparable blunder But he had to come out with it!

'Yes, you'd have been on velvet if we'd stayed Your father was there! You could have gone home with him. ... Wouldn't that have been nice?'

A silence followed. He turned, gazed at her through his tears and saw her calmer than ever, but with a new look in her eyes that startled him

‘What did you say?’

‘I said your father was at the pictures That’s why I hurried you away That’s why I was in such a state. *Now* do you understand?’

‘Was he by himself?’ she asked quietly

Then he remembered that M Grandvalet had been in mourning. Colouring up, he said uncomfortably :

‘Yes, he was alone.’

Her eyes were dry But she never cried Under the stress of emotion she became pieteraturally calm, her voice grew faint, remote, and the blood left her cheeks.

‘And you didn’t tell me!’ From her tone, she might have been talking to herself

‘If you’d known, you’d have gone back with him, wouldn’t you now?’

But she admitted nothing She remained quite still, with a far-away look in her eyes; she seemed to have forgotten where she was, and who was with her

He was taking off his clothes with jerky, spasmodic movements, hardly knowing what he did. The struggle to build up some sort of happiness for the two of them had worn him out And all his efforts had been wasted ! What use had it been finding and furnishing a flat, bringing home something more for it each day, trying to make the place to Juliette’s liking?

‘Aren’t you going to undress?’ He didn’t dare to meet her eyes.

She undressed like someone in a dream He got into bed first, and watched her as she took off her stockings, seated by the dressing-table.

‘Shall I turn the light off?’ she asked

~~There was no answer,~~ she pressed the switch, leaving the room in darkness but for a faint glow from the stove on the far side of the room. Then she came to the bed

and lay down at his side, but leaving a space between them.

'Good night,' she said

He could not hear her breathing, nor feel the body beside his. And as the minutes passed he grew restless and groped for Juliette's face, to kiss it. Never yet had they gone to sleep without kissing each other

She did not move, and suddenly his anger flared up and he started hammering her with his fists in the darkness, uttering broken cries of fury and despair. He felt her trying to free an arm, and at first wondered what she was after. She wanted to reach the lamp-switch over the bed. There was a click, the light came on, and he saw her face, pale with dread, but the same far-away look in her eyes.

'Do try to keep calm!'

He ceased striking her. But only to start beating himself in an access of hysterical contrition. She slipped out of the bed, walked bare-footed to the tap, and came back with a wet towel which she placed on his forehead

'There! There!' she murmured 'It's all right now. And you needn't worry; I'll go and see the old woman tomorrow'

When he awoke his head felt like a hollow block of wood, his throat was raw and swollen. Juliette was already in the kitchen, making the coffee. Buses were rumbling down the street outside

VII

'It's all her fault,' Bachelin muttered to himself as he threaded his way between groups of housewives chaffering round costermongers' barrows piled with early vegetables and fruit that seemed as frail and precocious as the warmth of the spring day. His eyes held by the

colourful scene around him, he added hastily : 'Well, it's not *my* fault, anyhow!'

He walked the full length of the Rue de Turenne as he did every morning, and as he and Juliette had done the night before on their way back from the picture-house. As a rule, the noise and bustle, the tide of traffic sounding on its ways, the sight of market-stalls and antiquated courtyards filled with delivery-vans, the surging crowds of poor and near-poor people – all these gave a welcome fillip to his nerves. In fact, this gay profusion of forms and colours, sounds and faces, had the same tonic effect on him as had the pictures – and this, too, was something Juliette would never understand!

But somehow this morning, as he strode ahead, his hands as usual in his pockets, the presence of the crowd did not produce its usual effect. He was unable to shake off his depression, and a feeling of disgust less with her than with himself. Why, intelligent though he was, could he never contrive to keep his mouth shut when one of their absurd quarrels was brewing?

But only too well he knew; it went deeper than that. The scene that took place last night had been a mere ripple on the surface. The trouble lay in his own nature; he was temperamentally unfit for happiness.

His eyes fell on a woman selling cauliflowers, a slatternly, down-at-heel old creature, her face disfigured by a skin-disease. She was bawling her wares in raucous, vulgar tones. Yet she showed no sign of discontentment with her lot, when he looked into her eyes he saw there no regrets, no sadness.

His thoughts harked back to Nevers, and a picture rose before him of his friend Lasserre, a brainless fool but blissfully unconscious of his folly, forging ahead in life with smug assurance. Berthold, the bank-clerk, was another one who never seemed to worry about anything.

Even Jacquemin the hunchback enjoyed life in his way; if there was sometimes an undertone of bitterness in his voice and his smile seemed a little twisted, well, his infirmity would account for that.

Then he thought of Juliette again 'Of course it's her fault in a sense, but there's more to it than that'

He felt sure she was in love with him, otherwise she would never have put up with the hardships they had shared in Paris. And yet, when they were together, always there was a rift between them, a rift that never could be patched up, however hard they tried. For both were full of good intentions, they tried their utmost.

Why at the last moment, inevitably, did he always blurt out the one thing that should not be said? And say it knowing well that it could only bring disaster? But that was Bachelin's way; all his life he had had this fatal knack of 'looking for trouble' as his friends described it. While other men, that swine Van Lubbe for instance, seemed to have a gift for making the best of things.

Why had M. Grandvalet been in mourning?

That was something else for which Juliette would never forgive him – for not letting her know at once that he had seen her father. .. Was Mme Grandvalet dead?

When a small boy running past bumped into him, he gave a nervous start. Rarely had he felt so feeble and defenceless. His mood affected him physically; his head was aching with the stress of thought, and people in the street were eyeing curiously this gaunt young man with the twitching face.

He bent his mind on consoling memories of the past, but a lurking sense of failure pervaded them too. When he recalled those passionate embraces in the dark portico of the old maid's house at Nevers, he remembered above all his clumsiness, the ineffectual caresses he had forced

on Juliette, her apathy, and the old woman's recriminations from the upper window. When he recalled the *Café de la Paix*, a memory of the trick he had used for cheating at cards gave him a faint disgust. And yet – hadn't he the right to try to keep his end up by every means available, considering the handicaps against which he had to struggle?

As he entered the Place de la République a look of grim determination settled on his face. A thought flashed through his mind of the child that probably had just come into the world, in the Leroy's work-room. Leroy, too, was bitter – but only when he'd been drinking.

'Hasn't Monsieur Van Lubbe turned up yet?' he asked the waiter at the *Brasserie Nouvelle*.

'I haven't seen him this morning.'

The *brasserie* seemed very dark after the sunlit square, where roundabouts and booths were being run up in preparation for one of the periodic fairs.

'A *café au lait*, please.' He had resolved not to drink any alcohol. But as the waiter was going away he changed his mind. 'No, a gin and bitters.'

After all, it was one way of overcoming his depression. Other people might dispense with it; not he.

Van Lubbe was always amiable with Bachelin, and most attentive to Juliette, to whom he constantly gave presents. Two or three nights a week they dined with him at a big restaurant, and the Belgian always ordered vintage wine.

But one could see that he despised Bachelin, and that his affability was condescending. 'If,' Bachelin thought, 'he could get Juliette away from me, he'd do it.'

The waiters were polishing the mirrors on the walls, after dusting them over with chalk. There were about a dozen customers, and their faces were familiar to Bachelin, as they came here almost every morning.

'If he doesn't turn up within the next ten minutes I'll go.'

But he knew quite well he wouldn't go; he needed money and there was no one but Van Lubbe to provide it. The man must be doing very well out of his racket; he spent money like water and owned a large car — out of which a few minutes later Bachelin saw him stepping, plump and prosperous-looking as ever, with his usual air of satisfaction with the world at large.

'Ah, here you are!' He held out his hand with the same sweeping gesture as he had made to close the door of his car, the gesture of a man who is on the crest of the wave. With a little grunt of contentment he sank heavily on to the wall-sofa. 'Ernest! A small vermouth with a dash of lemon.'

While Van Lubbe swept his eyes round the room to see who was there, Bachelin's face took on its surliest look, his lips tightened, his pupils contracted to pin-points.

'Any news?'

Bachelin did not answer. As his gaze slowly shifted to the man beside him he seemed rapt in contemplation of some secret thought that at once disquieted and elated him.

'What's up?' The Belgian seemed surprised.

'Nothing.'

The waiter had brought the drinks. Van Lubbe laid his wallet on the table and started counting out hundred-franc notes.

'It was a thousand francs you wanted, wasn't it?'

'No, ten thousand,' Bachelin, who had seen a wad of thousand-franc notes in the wallet, retorted.

The Belgian looked up with a grin.

'What's the big idea? Why not a million while you're about it?'

But the grin died out when he saw the expression of the young man's face, his quivering nostrils, and, most revealing of all, the fixity of his gaze.

'I want ten thousand.' Bachelin's knees were knocking together under the table

'I'll give you the thousand francs I promised, not a franc more. And that's my last word.'

'And I say you're to give me *twenty* thousand – not a franc less!'

Van Lubbe thought hard, his forehead deeply furrowed. All the cordiality had left his face

'What does this mean?' he asked slowly.

'It means – that I'm through with you.'

'Oh, that's your game, is it?'

'That's my game.'

'And you want twenty thousand francs to keep your mouth shut?'

'You've got it!'

The Belgian was holding himself in, and the effort was so great that his voice sounded quite different from his usual one. Deliberately he replaced the notes in his wallet and stowed it in his pocket.

Bachelin was horribly afraid, mentally and physically. Every second prolonged his agony, but he kept his eyes riveted on Van Lubbe's face, as though that were the only way to keep the man at bay.

The Belgian rose quietly from his seat. His manner was that of a man who, after a drink or two, is proposing to leave a café. But when he took a step forward, instinctively Bachelin raised an arm to shield his head. It was too late. The Belgian's fist crashed on his nose.

'You dirty little skunk!'

Bachelin's eyes were blurred, he could see nothing. He heard the sound of chairs pushed back and waited in agonized suspense for some of the people in the café to

intervene. But it was not until Van Lubbe had struck twice more that he heard a voice protesting.

'Stop that! Why doesn't somebody call the police?'

There was a sound of footsteps running to the telephone-box

But before the police arrived the Belgian had gripped Bachelin's coat-collar, run him to the door, and with a lunge of his knee projected him into the street

That was the end. Van Lubbe went to a glass, straightened his tie and smoothed his hair, while Bachelin slowly picked himself up and slunk away, hatless, muttering to himself

When he put his hand to his face, he found his nose was bleeding, and was seized by panic. At the time he'd hardly felt the blows, but now his head was beginning to ache violently. People stopped to stare at him, and he glared back like a vicious dog.

What had possessed him to act like that?

'But he's not through with me yet!' he told himself. 'He may be physically stronger, but I'll beat him in the end.' He was in exactly the same mood — even his bodily sensations were much the same — as when in his boyhood he had been given a licking in the street and crept home, nursing bloodthirsty projects of revenge.

Gradually he slackened his pace, and his thoughts turned to Juliette, who at this moment must be tidying up the flat, in slippers and a dressing-gown. Or perhaps she had gone out by now to do her marketing in the street where he had seen the costermongers' barrows.

When he got home his nose had stopped bleeding, but his face was swollen and there were red stains on his collar and shirt. Juliette was out. As usual, she had left a pencilled note 'Back in a few minutes'. A saucepan was simmering on the gas-ring, a smell of boiling cabbage pervaded the little flat

The bed was already made, and he stretched himself on it, fully dressed. On hearing footsteps in the passage he closed his eyes, so as to postpone the disagreeable task of explanation

The bed seemed to be moving under him, and he clutched desperately at the sheets, his pulses thudding in his ears; he had an impression of being carried forward at an ever-increasing speed. . . No, things couldn't go on like this indefinitely; he was heading for a crash – that much he knew. But what form the crash would take there was no knowing.

Suddenly, for some reason, a picture formed before him of Juliette's father standing in the entrance of the picture-house, in deep mourning, his face pale and drawn. Had he a moustache, a beard? Bachelin couldn't remember – but what did it matter anyhow? Then he had a feeling that Juliette was bending over him, but he kept quite still, his eyes closed. A moment later he heard her moving about the kitchen, the sound of butter sizzling in a pan. .

When he opened his eyes, he realized for the first time the makeshift, uncouth appearance of the room. The wallpaper was new, the furniture rudimentary. Still, at least they would have a roof over their heads for the next two months, as he had paid a quarter's rent in advance.

Would Juliette have gone up and spoken to her father had she seen him at the cinema? Would she have consented to return to Nevers?

'Dirty little skunk!'

Ten or fifteen people had been present, they had seen Bachelin stumble to his feet and slink off like a whipped cur. And yet it was in his power to have Van Lubbe sent to jail. For Van Lubbe was the 'dirty skunk', the real criminal!

'Asleep?' a low voice whispered in his ear

He looked up at her. She too seemed depressed. For some days she had been ailing. Her complexion had gone sallow, and pimples were constantly breaking out on her lips and forehead.

He sighed and asked:

'Lunch ready?'

They sat down at the table, facing each other. Juliette served the meal. She didn't dare to ask him anything.

'The gas-man has been,' she remarked, to break the silence.

He said nothing. The food stuck in his throat. brussels sprouts that he gulped down without munching them, without appetite. At one moment he felt something warm and sticky on his lips, and Juliette said in a toneless voice:

'You're bleeding.'

*

'Has M. Émile come yet?'

'No, but he'll be here any minute now.'

The same remarks were exchanged every day. M. Grandvalet walked to the far end of the little restaurant where daily, at about noon, the inspectors of the *Police Judiciaire* were to be found. There was a step to go down on the way to the horseshoe-shaped bar, presided over by the proprietor, a tall man with a waxed moustache, wearing a blue apron. Élise, one of the waitresses, poured out a glass of gentian bitters for M. Grandvalet.

For, now that he had got into the habit of spending more than half the day in this café-restaurant, he was obliged to drink now and then, and, on Élise's advice, had taken to gentian bitters as being the least alcoholic of the drinks available.

'Like to see the paper, Monsieur Grandvalet?'

He took his gold-rimmed spectacles from their case,

polished them with a square of chamois-leather before putting them on, then ran his eyes over the paper

The Place Dauphine, which the café overlooked, was always very quiet. Sometimes M. Émile came in a taxi, but oftener he alighted from a bus at the Pont Neuf, and M. Grandvalet had come to know his footsteps.

After all, it was one way of filling his empty days – what else indeed was there to do? He was still at the *Hôtel du Centre*, and was getting more and more used to living there. It was there that one morning he had had a telegram from Mme Jamar announcing that his wife had passed away during the night.

Accompanied by his son, he had taken the first train to Nevers. His daughter-in-law had stayed another day in Paris to procure mourning for herself and the children.

At Nevers everything had gone off with a curious absence of emotion, almost without tears. Indeed, Mme Jamar had been the only one to weep profusely, she had kept on repeating that Mme Grandvalet had died ‘like a real saint’, and appeared genuinely heart-broken.

Mme Grandvalet had succumbed, it seemed, to a combined onslaught of influenza and uraemia, when already very much run down. The fatal attack had taken place at night and come so abruptly that she had hardly had time to realize she was dying.

Only on their return to Paris did Philippe ask his father to consent to a partition of the estate.

‘I’ve a wife and children to think of,’ he explained. ‘I must safeguard their future.’

But, owing to Juliette’s absence, the deed could not be executed – her signature was indispensable – and M. Émile was continuing his attempts to trace her with renewed vigour.

One day he had actually seen Bachelin, when the young man was leaving the premises of a firm of ex-

porters in the Rue d'Hauteville. He had followed him along the Boulevards and stepped into the underground at his heels, but at a change of trains had lost sight of him in the crowd. He took this failure as cheerfully as its predecessors.

'Anyhow, it proves they're still in Paris.'

Two or three times a week M. Grandvalet called in at police headquarters and settled down beside the stove in a chair that had almost come to be regarded as reserved for him. He knew most of the staff of the department where the Visitors' Lists were collated, and when they flocked to the café in the Place Dauphine for a drink before lunch they always looked out for him and gave him a nod and a smile.

'Nothing come in?' he would ask.

At first he had been the subject of jocose remarks, but now they found him rather pathetic. He limited his reading in the papers to the police news and reports of unnatural deaths, especially deaths by drowning. It was as if he had a presentiment that the young people's escapade would end in tragedy.

That day it was clear from the look on M. Émile's face as he took the chair facing M. Grandvalet's and ordered his invariable Pernod that he had something up his sleeve.

'Good news!' he smiled.

'Yes? What is it?'

'Well, I wouldn't go so far as to say I've actually rounded them up, but I'm pretty sure I'll have done so within three days at most. You'll say I've told you that before. But this time I'm on something definite – in fact, it's a cert.'

M. Grandvalet showed no emotion. Perhaps he had been so long on this quest that he couldn't even visualize its ending. He stared at the enquiry agent, who had put

on weight, and saw Élise in the background listening with all her ears while she laid a table. Two inspectors were lounging against the bar.

'It's rather funny, the way I got on to it. One of my old colleagues at the *Judiciaire* was talking of a goods-on-credit racket that's been going on for some months. He was saying they had their eye on an old woman, a wardrobe-dealer, who's been getting masses of stuff at a suspiciously low price.'

Was M. Grandvalet listening? His thoughts seemed far away.

'One has to watch one's step in enquiries of that sort. I went to see the old dame — she's a retired brothel-keeper — and tried to make her speak, but she wasn't to be drawn. All I could get out of her was that a girl comes to her several times a week, to collect the money.'

'And you think that girl's my daughter, do you?' M. Grandvalet sounded sceptical.

'Wait! There's more to it than that. Of course I wasn't such a fool as to show your daughter's photo to the old woman. But I showed it to the door-keeper of the block of flats, and she recognized her at once.'

'Where is it?'

'In a small street behind the Rue des Petits-Champs.'

'Is that all you found out?'

'It's enough for our purposes. A lot of stuff was delivered there a few days ago. Which means that your daughter will be calling to collect the money for it at any moment.'

Already it was an effort for M. Grandvalet to evoke Juliette's form and face — especially in a setting and in situations so different from those in which he'd seen her in the past. For Juliette had always been shy — after her manner. It had been most difficult to persuade her to go on shopping errands for her parents, and when she had

consented, she would hardly say a word to the shopkeepers, and pointed to the objects she'd been sent to buy

Once when they had asked her to take a cheque to the tax-collector and insist on a receipt, she had shed tears, and M Grandvalet had had to exercise his parental authority and threaten her with the direst punishment before she could be induced to go there

M Émile was rambling on . Might he not be mistaken, as so often before? Or even lying? Impossible to tell In a sense it was he who was forcing himself on M. Grandvalet, refusing to drop the enquiry, perpetually insisting on his doing this or that. He even meddled in his client's private life, he had badgered M Grandvalet into promising to go to the pictures every other night, on the ground that the atmosphere of the hotel was 'too depressing for words'.

'Leave it to me. Everything's going fine, you can take my word for it '

M Grandvalet didn't dare to stand up to him, and had even got into the way of concealing from the enquiry agent certain things that he did on his own initiative — his visits, for instance, to the Leroy, whose baby had now been born

He always brought with him some food, buying it on his way up the Rue Lepic He timed his visits so as to arrive when Leroy was out, and he chatted with the young mother while she painted flowers on her lampshades He much preferred the atmosphere here to that of his son's flat, where he now dined once a week only, on Tuesdays

'I've put a man on to keep watch in the street, and he has your daughter's photo In half an hour or so I'll go there and relieve him. But we shall have to think over our next move We could try following her, of course, when she comes out, but it's a bit of a gamble,

considering how crowded the streets are in the afternoon. It looks easy enough, but just you try it!’

M. Grandvalet’s eyes rested on the other’s face with a look of mild enquiry

‘If I were you,’ M. Émile continued, ‘I’d go about it in a different way. I think you’d better lay a complaint. We’ll get a warrant and an inspector will be waiting with me in the street. A quarter of an hour later we’ll be at the police station with your daughter, and —’ He pulled up, struck by the look of consternation on M. Grandvalet’s face. ‘Oh, there’s nothing to be alarmed about. She won’t be arrested or anything of that sort. Once we’re at the police station it’ll be quite easy to fix things up. You’ll withdraw your complaint and take your daughter home with you.’

But M. Grandvalet shook his head peremptorily. He wouldn’t hear of it!

‘I’ll go there with you,’ he said

And after Élise — who, as it turned out, also came from the Nevers district — had served them with their lunch, the two men set out together to the Rue des Petits-Champs. Dusk was falling, and the narrow street was cluttered up with the stalls of dealers in second-hand goods of all descriptions. Lugubrious at the best of times, it looked even more so in the misty light of the street-lamps, big, greenish-yellow globes, that were now being turned on one by one. There was a series of small shops — stamp-dealers, sellers of pornographic books, medical appliances and the like. M. Émile went up to a shabbily dressed young man who was standing at one of the doors

‘You can buzz off now.’

The ground floor was occupied by a confectioner’s shop, but notices under the portico informed the public that on higher floors were the premises of a maker of artificial flowers and a wardrobe-dealer

It was not yet quite dark; the vestibule was illuminated by the sunset glow on a window at the far end, as well as by a street-lamp just in front

‘It would be better if she didn’t spot you when she comes. Turn up the collar of your coat and keep your eyes on the shop-window’

M Grandvalet turned up his collar readily enough, as a cold wind was blowing

VIII

JULIETTE went by without noticing anything. But she had always walked like that, looking straight ahead, taking no notice of the people she passed or what was going on around her. She was wearing her fur coat and a black hat, and had the appearance of a young, newly married, middle-class woman in rather poor health, or with something on her mind.

She walked past the confectioner’s, turned at once into the vestibule, went up to the first floor and pulled the woollen bell-cord beside the door. On previous occasions Mme Hedoin had always opened the door at once – so promptly indeed that Juliette had fancied she spent her days behind it on the wait for callers. This evening it was otherwise. There was a sound of slippèd footsteps at the far end of the flat, but when they reached the door some minutes’ silence followed. Then abruptly came the rattle of a safety-chain being taken down and the creak of a bolt drawn back.

The door opened a couple of inches.

‘Are you quite crazy?’ a hoarse voice whispered.

A big moon-face – white hair, flabby, tallowy cheeks – seemed glimmering with its own light behind the narrow slit; the eyes had their usual look of furtive apprehension. Juliette put her hand on the door, about to

push it open, and the old woman hissed at her :

'Wotcher want? Why've you come here?'

There were footsteps overhead. Someone was coming down the staircase from the flat above. The door opened reluctantly.

'I know your game! You're in with the cops, ain't you, and you want to get me nabbed?'

The scene inside was odd enough to match the old creature's grotesque appearance. The room was very low and lighted by no ordinary lamps but by electric bulbs concealed beneath the skirts of dolls seated on brackets in more or less suggestive poses. In the uncertain light everything took on a dubious aspect, like things seen in a dream. The silk curtains were an anaemic pink, like sweets that have stayed too long in a shop-window, and the would-be antique furniture looked as if it might crumble at a touch. Cushions of all shapes and sizes lay about in the most unlikely places, and every table was littered with bric-à-brac. Mme Hedoin herself was a shapeless mass of frills and flounces, and reeked of all the perfumes of the bargain-basement.

Juliette took a slip of paper from her pocket.

'I've come about the bill.'

'Eh? Don't you know what's happened?'

'What has happened?'

'The police ..' The old woman seemed to gasp for breath.

'Well, what about the police?'

Mme Hedoin's large eyes were swimming, and their look of fear intensified. Without a word she took Juliette by the hand and led her to the window. With a lavishly beinged finger she drew a curtain slightly to one side. The lower panes were covered by a crochet-work window-screen, and one saw the street through a sort of spider's web.

It was half-past five, the busiest hour in the narrow by-street, which dated from approximately the same epoch as Mme Hedoin's flat – not to mention the lady herself – and at this moment had a family likeness with the flat, for it was cluttered up with objects of all kinds. hand-carts, crates, packing-cases, delivery vans. Lights were twinkling in all directions and people scurrying to and fro like panicking ants. Indeed, so aimless seemed their movements, viewed from the first-floor window, that one could hardly believe they knew what they were after, where they were going. In a shop-window immediately opposite, the most dimly lit of all, a very old man wearing a loose white coat was seated at a sort of lathe, worked by treadles, shaping meerschaum pipes.

‘Do you see them?’ whispered Mme Hedoin. ‘Just now they were standing outside the wig-shop.’

Between the meshes of the crochet-work Juliette could feel the coolness of the window-pane against her forehead. Suddenly, though she was looking down without much interest, and only because she had been asked to do so, her gaze fell on a small dark form, a bowler hat, a very pale face spanned by a greying moustache – her father's face!

With him was a stoutish man, and both had their eyes fixed on the door of the building she had just entered.

‘They’ve been on the watch for two days now,’ Juliette could feel a large flabby breast pressing against her shoulder as the woman whispered in her ear.

She was surprised to find herself so calm, so little affected by the sight of her father. All she really felt was curiosity. She looked at him now in a different way from that in which one usually thinks of looking at one's parents. What a quaint little man he was! Never before had she noticed the cut of his overcoat, too narrow in the shoulders and falling too straight. It gave him a dowdy,

rather doleful air, enhanced today by his black tie and the crape band round his hat

She hadn't noticed the crape band at first and, seeing it, she fell to wondering for whom her father was in mourning.

'The little one must be the Superintendent Till now there were two other men, who took it in turns to watch. I hadn't seen the little one, not till this afternoon Perhaps they got wind that you'd be coming.'

Was Bachelin still lying on the bed? While he was asleep Juliette had examined the contents of his wallet and found he had no money left She had waited till he woke up and then remarked:

'So it's off with Van Lubbe?'

She refrained from looking at his face because of the swollen nose, of which she guessed he was ashamed

'Never mention him again, please'

'The gas-man will be coming again tomorrow morning.'

For a long while, lying on his back, he stared dully at the ceiling. At last he said with a sigh:

'You'd better go and see the old woman – for the last time She owes us two thousand francs.'

Juliette might have told him to go there himself, but she didn't do so, for she knew it would be useless Something had happened; Bachelin had crept home like a wounded animal, and taken to his bed with an air of throwing up the sponge

'Don't tell her that we've broken with Van Lubbe.'

So she had dressed and taken the bus to the Rue des Petits-Champs. Now, her face pressed to the pane, she was watching the two men, her father especially – whom Mme Hedoin had taken for a police superintendent!

'I know their idea They're waiting for you to come out, and then they'll follow you home and put you

through it. If you squeal, they'll round up the lot of us.

Juliette turned and gazed at the dimly lit room, faded brocades, old-fashioned pictures, the great white face. She was thinking hard, her attention divided between the turmoil of the street below and the quiet room. Her eyes came to rest on a small, damp log spluttering feebly on the fire-dogs.

'Well? What do you propose to do?' the old woman asked

Undoubtedly that man with her father had something to do with the police. Only the police could have got on her track — probably when they were investigating the activities of the Van Lubbe gang.

On leaving the building she would be shadowed; there would be a knock at the door of the flat in the Rue du Pas-de-la-Mule the moment after she entered. Composedly she said :

'Tell me! Isn't there a back way out?'

The sight of her father hadn't produced on her the effect one might have expected. Indeed, she could hardly believe that she had lived nearly all her life with him. He struck her now as a stranger, a vague loiterer in the street, at whom she was throwing casual glances from an upper window.

'No, there's no way of getting out without being seen. And the worst of it is I've some of the stuff here. I always said as it'd end up badly. They'll come and search the place and haul us off to the lock-up. ... Oh dear, can't you think of something to do?'

Her voice, which had the feeble burr of a worn-out gramophone record, trailed off in a whimper. Juliette, however, had kept her head, and was reviewing the position from every angle. Suddenly she asked :

'Do you know the people in the flat above?'

'Them? Not likely! They don't even wish you "Good

morning" when you pass 'em on the stairs.' Then, as a new idea occurred to her, the moon-face seemed to come to life. 'I've got it! Have you a good head? I mean, do you get dizzy easily?'

'Why do you ask that?'

'Because there's a yard at the back, with a glass roof, just level with this flat.'

As she continued giving explanations her voice grew wheedling, and when she found Juliette willing to carry out her plan, she got some brown paper from a cupboard and made a bundle of three women's coats, the latest proceeds of the goods-on-credit swindle.

'Will you be very nice, Madame Juliette, and take this stuff away with you? Then they can search the flat as much as they like, but they won't find nothing. It'll make all the difference - for all of us'

She was tying up the parcel with a dexterity that took one by surprise

'It ain't my fault, dearie,' she whined, 'but I can't possibly let you have the money, as I'm giving the stuff back. That's only fair, ain't it? Anyhow, I don't keep no money in the flat, and since them cops started watching I haven't stirred out of the place. I've hardly had a bite to eat for two days now, only scraps and leavings. ...'

Juliette gave a final glance at the street. Her father was partly hidden by M. Émile's burly form. Again, she wondered for whom he was in mourning. But, she told herself, in large families, one's almost always in mourning for someone. an uncle, aunt, nephew, or the like.

The parcel was soft and bulky. The woman led Juliette through the kitchen into a small dark scullery, and opened the window.

Immediately below a glass roof glimmered in the darkness, for some lights were on in the yard underneath. On the far side, between two blank walls, rose tiers of

windows, some of which were lighted, six storeys high.

'That window just in front is always open. It gives on to the main staircase in the next block of flats.'

As Juliette stepped out of the window, Mme Hedoin added in a dramatic whisper -

'Good luck, dearie! Mind the parcel!'

It was quite an easy feat; all she had to do was to walk along the metal ribs between the panes, and she had only some ten feet to cover. Juliette took it at a rush, without giving herself time to feel frightened. Again she heard Mme Hedoin's voice across the darkness -

'Don't forget the parcel, whatever you do.'

The last she saw of the old woman was a pallid moon-face peering from the scullery window. The almost lightless staircase smelt of fish-glue - a manufacturer of cardboard boxes occupied the basement.

In her haste she nearly let herself be detected, for the two men were standing just in front of the street door. But they were looking into the confectioner's window. Juliette stepped back hastily and watched them. They were talking. M. Émile lit his pipe and she took advantage of the moment when he was shielding the match-flame with his hands to plunge into the stream of passers-by and hasten towards the Rue des Petits-Champs.

And then, out of the blue, panic took hold of her, a senseless panic that made her blunder ahead, almost at a run; with the result that she lost her way in the tangle of small streets and couldn't find the Metro station. Fearing she was being shadowed she would not turn back. The voluminous parcel hampered her movements; the string was cutting into her hand.

At last she saw some taxis waiting outside a theatre where a *matinée* was evidently in progress, as all the

lights were on. Jumping into the first one, she told the driver to take her to the Rue du Pas-de-la-Mule.

She pictured Mme Hedoin still at her window, plucking with a furtive finger at the hem of a pink curtain and peeping at the two men in the street. Never, it seemed to her, had she known Paris so crowded, the din of the motor-horns so continuous.

‘What number?’ asked the taximan over his shoulder.

‘Drop me at the corner of the street, please.’ A new idea waylaid her. ‘No, drive to the quay first.’

‘Which quay?’

‘Anywhere on the river-bank.’

She was worried about the parcel. It would be disastrous if the police followed up the trail and discovered the three coats. When after a few minutes the taxi drew up beside a bridge, she was surprised to find the Seine had been so near.

All she had seen of the driver was a broad, impassive back. What would the man imagine when he noticed her carrying her big parcel to the river’s edge? For a moment she lost her nerve and said weakly :

‘Drive along the river-bank, please.’

He started his engine again. In a half-dream Juliette gazed at the lights along the tow-path and their reflexions in the black, sluggish water.

‘Stop here!’

There was a chink of coins as she fumbled feverishly in her bag. When the taxi had driven off she started walking along the river-bank, beside the grey stone parapet. It seemed impossible to find a really quiet spot. At one point she passed a policeman on duty at the approaches to a bridge. The stiff brown paper creaked like new shoes, and she had a feeling that the noise was attracting attention.

After walking quickly past the Ile Saint-Louis she

came to another bridge and turned on to it, as for the moment it seemed deserted. Half-way across she halted abruptly and dropped her parcel over the parapet. It seemed to take ages to reach the water, but at last there was a faint splash. A loving couple, arm in arm, turned and gave her a long stare.

She had got over her impression of being followed; nothing now prevented her from going home. It was only five minutes' walk from here to the flat and there was no need to hurry. For the first time she realized how tired she was and she halted twice, leaning against the parapet, and gazed at the dark mass of Notre Dame looming against the dully glowing sky. It did her good to linger thus, alone with her thoughts, beside the night-bound river

Could it be her mother was dead? She asked herself the question quite unemotionally. Her mother was a worthy woman with whom she had lived for seventeen years, but whom, when all was said and done, she hardly knew. 'I'll tell your father about it,' she used to say when Juliette had done something naughty. Or else: 'Your brother would never have thought of behaving like that. I wish you took after him.'

For Philippe had always been her favourite. He and his mother seemed to understand each other, whereas Juliette spoke rarely, didn't read the books her parents read, thought for herself, and could barely suppress a yawn when in the evening her father said:

'Well, what are you going to play for me tonight?'

Even in music he had no taste, no preferences.

All the same, she felt depressed, but it was a vague depression, such as suddenly pervades the mind when one has a premonition of impending trouble.

If her mother was dead, her father was by himself in Paris and presumably dined fairly often at Philippe's flat.

She pictured them at table, and Philippe saying nasty things about her, as he always did

As for Bachelin, if he wasn't asleep he would be mooning about the flat nursing his usual grievances. Though he affected a cynical detachment, one could see he became terribly downhearted whenever he ran out of money. More than downhearted, humiliated, abject. On such occasions he seemed to lose all power of initiative; a hunted look came into his eyes, and he wouldn't stir a finger to remedy the situation. Today, for instance, he'd sent Juliette for the money, instead of going for it himself.

And she had failed to get it! All she had left in her bag was twenty francs or so. And the gas-man had threatened to cut off the gas if the bill wasn't settled at his next visit!

The night was turning cold. Barges were moored along the river-bank, and in some of them gleamed little windows, curtained like cottage-windows. People were taking their dogs for a run along the tow-path. Here all was calm. The stir of life began several hundred yards away, on the Pont d'Austerlitz and in the direction of the Hôtel de Ville. Gaunt and leafless, the trees round the little boat-shaped island, the Ile Saint-Louis, appeared to rise directly from the river, etching an arabesque of branches on the white wall of the embankment.

Juliette could hardly tear herself away. For a moment it struck her how easy it would be to have done with it and throw herself into the glimmering darkness of the river, but a glimpse of a lighted tramcar, taking people to their homes and the evening meal, was enough to dispel the thought promptly and effectively.

Had her father and the police officer entered Mme Hedoin's flat and interviewed her? ... Suddenly a feeling came to her of the *absurdity* of the life she now was leading. And for once she gazed with real interest at the

faces of the people passing her, lit up for a moment as they passed under a street-lamp or in front of a shop-window. Was it possible that any of these men and women had lives resembling hers – at once so drab and so grotesque?

But at Nevers it was no better. She had no repinings for the home in which she had been brought up, the piano-lessons with that music-teacher who had a habit of placing his hand on her shoulder and whose breath smelt – and all the rest of it. She watched people crowding into the cafés, and followed the men with her eyes as they pushed their way towards the bar. .. And what about Mme Hedoin, who spent her days like a fat yellow insect wrapped in its cocoon? What was the sense, if any, of her life?

Juliette had made a wide detour. Now she was back in the noise and bustle of the Rue Saint-Antoine. Overcoats and reach-me-down suits were stacked on trestle-tables on the pavement, or displayed on hangers, and salesmen, shivering with cold, were accosting passers-by with a shamefaced air:

‘Want a nice coat, Mademoiselle?’

Then came more cafés, more people diving into them ‘for a short one’, as if their lives depended on it. The shutters of a big store were clanging down, and hundreds of employees, men and girls, streaming out from a side-door, making for the nearest Metro station and the bus-stops.

Juliette entered a pork-butcher’s and bought twelve francs’ worth of ham, after which she had only eight francs left. But she was not in a tragic or even a despondent mood. All she felt was an enormous inanition; she went on walking because there was nothing else to do, and was hardly conscious where she was going.

A thought flashed through her mind: ‘There’ll be a

dreadful scene!' That was inevitable. When he found she hadn't got the money from Mme Hedoin Bachelin would have a pretext for flying into a rage, and he never failed to take such pretexts. Yet he loved her, in his fashion. He was unhappy, far unhappier than she. He took things hardly, wore himself out in unavailing efforts – without knowing really what it was he wanted.

Did she love him? She could not tell; but she knew he was mistaken when, after embracing her in the porch of the old maid's house at Nevers, he would exclaim indignantly:

'You always keep so calm! One would think you didn't like my kissing you!'

He didn't understand. Though outwardly she kept calm, her nerves were on the stretch; but the contained emotion that possessed her at such moments was something right outside his range. His way of showing emotion was so different – a matter of hugs and kisses, at once clumsy and painfully direct ... and to her more tedious than otherwise.

And now in Paris it was as it had been at Nevers. In the most passionate moments she kept her eyes wide open, curiously intent; again and again this habit of hers had led to angry scenes. He never noticed how pale her face had suddenly become; never realized her body was taut and quivering like a stretched wire, her pupils rigid as a sleep-walker's.

Carrying her little parcel, she walked slowly homewards. By the time she turned into the Rue Pas-de-la-Mule all the shops were shut. She would have given much to postpone the moment of entering the flat.

As she went past the concierge's room she heard the door open and a voice say:

'There's a letter for you.'

Never before had a letter come to them. It was ad-

dressed 'M Jules Bachelin', in an unfamiliar hand, and had no stamp.

'Who brought it?'

'A messenger-boy from a café.'

The staircase was lit by dusty, low-powered bulbs, one for each landing. On the second floor Juliette halted, examined the envelope more closely, and saw the words *Brasserie Nouvelle* printed on the flap.

On the next landing she halted again and without any hesitation tore the envelope open

*'If you're fool enough to breathe a word to anyone
I'll rip the guts out of you.'*

The note was unsigned, but she guessed at once that it came from Van Lubbe – and, incidentally, explained Bachelin's swollen nose.

She wondered what had happened, why the two men had come to blows. Probably Bachelin had said or done some silly thing, and had got the worst of the scrap that followed.

Slipping the note into her blouse, Juliette trudged up the next flight. After the second floor the staircase narrowed and was still more dimly lit. The moment she set foot on the landing the door opened and Bachelin appeared, lit by the glow of the hall-lamp: collarless, his waistcoat unbuttoned, his eyes haggard. Without a word he let Juliette go by, and closed the door

To gain some minutes' respite she walked straight to the kitchen, feigning not to notice his look of anxious enquiry, unfastened her packet and arranged the ham on a plate. The stove was roaring away – Bachelin hadn't thought of closing the flue – and coal-fumes filled the little flat.

Though she could not see him, Juliette could picture

him in the adjoining room, staring furiously at the door – and she allowed herself a few minutes more. After lighting the gas-ring she filled the kettle and put it on to boil. Then slowly she took off her hat and squirrel coat and entered the bedroom with the coat over her arm

‘Where have you been all this time?’

She did not answer at once; her eyes had fallen on a bowl of lukewarm water, with wads of cotton-wool floating in it. The bed was disarranged. Bachelin had been bathing his face, and the bruises made him look wretcheder, more tragic than ever. What changed his appearance most was the hugely swollen nose; it made his eyes appear still smaller and his set lips still narrower.

How thin he is! Juliette thought. Like an overgrown child

‘I asked you where you’d been.’

She had a sudden impulse to bandage the poor bruised face, to fondle him and make him feel less forlorn. It was not love in the ordinary sense, but a vaguer emotion, into which compassion entered, and the desire to do something, no matter what.

She went up to him and put her arm round his neck.

‘Listen, dear ...’ she began.

But he bristled up like a young fighting-cock.

‘None of that! I want an answer to my question.’

Buses were still rumbling down the street, but the noise and bustle of the last hours of a working day in Paris were dying down. Workers and employees were back in their homes; in thousands of little rooms couples were talking, preparing for the evening meal.

‘Have you got the money?’

Here, the table was not laid. The kettle was beginning to sing on the gas-stove. The imprint of Bachelin’s head showed on the crumpled pillow. ‘It’s got to be done!’

Juliette thought and, staring at the floor, she answered, softly but clearly :

‘No.’

IX

WHILE eating, M. Grandvalet kept his eyes fixed on the doorway. He was dining in a restaurant where he had never been before, in a by-street near the Rue des Petits-Champs. M. Émile had brought him here and told him to wait.

He plodded through the courses, hardly knowing what he ate, with an uncomfortable feeling that the other people in the restaurant were eyeing him as if he had no business here. Obviously they were regular patrons of the place; they called the waiter by name, and nearly everyone had his private napkin, kept in a rack beside the door.

M. Grandvalet could make nothing of these people. In Paris he always found it difficult to ‘place’ those with whom he came in contact, sometimes with embarrassing results. On entering this restaurant, for instance, his first impression had been so unfavourable that he had felt inclined to leave at once. To his thinking it was one of those low taverns which abound in Paris, and which he always avoided. Sheets of white paper served as tablecloths, the walls would have been the better for a wash.

But after a good look at the people at the neighbouring tables he discovered to his surprise that they seemed quite well-to-do. And, to his even greater surprise, on examining the menu, he found that the prices were much higher than those of his hotel.

But these were details. He wasn’t out to study the vagaries of the Parisians, or to decide whether he had

done well to come here, or speculate how much his bill would come to. ...

All the same, the atmosphere of the place and the sensation of being an intruder added to his despondency.

There are some restaurants where the hum of voices round one imparts a sense of security. But the customers here kept silent, some were reading newspapers, and the calm was so profound that M. Grandvalet hardly dared to summon the waiter.

He had just finished a plate of soup when his eye fell on a block calendar beside the bar, and the word '*Tuesday*' staring him in the face jogged his memory; he always dined with his son on Tuesdays.

'Waiter! Bring me the telephone directory.'

Philippe had no telephone in his flat, but there was one in the concierge's room on the ground floor, and after some searching M. Grandvalet found the number. He was shown into a telephone-box, the door of which would not shut, and he had a feeling that his voice carried to every corner of the restaurant.

'Excuse me, madame. Would you ask Monsieur Philippe Grandvalet to come down to the phone?'

There were four flights of stairs, and with his mind's eye he saw the concierge trudging slowly up them. It was after eight; dinner must have begun, and everybody be wondering what had happened to him.

'Hullo! Is that you, Philippe?'

'No. Hélène speaking.'

He told her he had been detained on urgent business, and she informed him that his son had gone to bed with a sudden attack of influenza.

Everybody stared at M. Grandvalet as he walked stiffly back to his chair. Never in all his life had he been in such an agony of suspense, but he showed no sign of it. The people watching him judged him a slightly

ridiculous, elderly bourgeois or provincial, who had blundered into one of the most renowned restaurants in Paris and was feeling rather out of his depth.

He kept an eye on the door. At any moment M. Émile might enter – and perhaps not alone! For that was how things stood. It was quite possible, if not probable, that within the next five minutes Juliette would be here, beside him, in the restaurant.

M. Émile had been quite positive about it; she must have remained in the old woman's flat, as there was no other exit than the front door. To cut matters short, the enquiry agent had decided to go up to the flat and tackle the old woman in her den.

'There's nothing to worry about. Just go to that restaurant and have a snack. I'll be with you presently.'

Strangely enough, the prospect of encountering his daughter alarmed M. Grandvalet as much as it delighted him. He had had quite a shock when Juliette walked past him, only a yard or two away, and M. Émile whispered:

'There she is!'

But for that he would hardly have recognized her. For one thing, of course, because he had never seen her in a fur coat before. But there was more than that; till now it had never struck him that Juliette might have changed.

Though he would never have dared to say it in so many words – for nobody would have understood – he had experienced no strong emotion of any kind when he saw her enter the block of flats. All he had felt was a sort of constraint that made him look away; as if his eyes had fallen on something he should not have seen.

Perhaps this was because for the first time he was picturing, though in no clear fashion, certain things he

had ignored till now. The young woman who walked past him had absolutely nothing in common with the girl whom he had used to ask each evening to play for him one of Chopin's polonaises. When he spoke to her it would be like talking to a stranger. Quite likely even her voice would be different

As he gazed frowningly at the entrance he caught himself thinking it was just as well that Philippe was laid up. It meant that they hadn't waited dinner for him.

Meanwhile M. Émile, looking portlier than ever in a thick greatcoat, was seated precariously in a slim gilt chair in Mme Hedoin's room. The old woman sat by the fireplace, in which only a cold, charred stump remained.

'It's no use going on at me like that. I've said I don't know nothing about it, and that's the gospel truth. I've never set eyes on the young person you've been talking about, much less had her here. . .'

At first she had refused to let him in, but the production of an old *Police Judiciaire* badge had overawed her.

'That's just too bad,' he sighed, and began to fill his pipe. 'We were counting on your help, and the case will work up big by the look of it. Abduction, arson, theft, racketeering – there's a whole string of charges.'

Mme Hedoin took it all quite calmly, sitting bolt upright in her chair and looking him in the eyes.

'I'm afraid I must ask you to come with me to headquarters, and of course we shall detain you for the night.'

The words took effect. After a long glance at the pink curtains, luminous dolls and fussy bric-à-brac – all the cushioned cosiness from which this heartless man was threatening to part her – her resolution faltered. However, she retorted:

'You've no right to do that.'

Coolly M. Émile lit his pipe and started pacing up and down the room.

'You,' he said, 'have quite a chance of getting off, as you may easily have bought the stuff in good faith – I mean, in the ordinary way of business. After all, you deal in clothing, and naturally you get it as cheap as you can.'

But it took him a good quarter of an hour to extract from her any useful information.

'You might try the Rue du Pas-de-la-Mule. I've heard talk of that address. ...'

She was badly rattled, and spent the night sewing banknotes and cash into her clothes.

M. Grandvalet had the shock that he had failed to experience on seeing his daughter, when the door opened with a loud squeak and M. Émile appeared, a deliberately non-committal expression on his face.

'Had a good dinner? ... Waiter, bring me a chop and mushrooms.'

M. Grandvalet stared at him piteously, not daring to put the question hovering on his lips.

'Give me just five minutes to get something inside me, and then we'll trot round and look up the young 'uns.'

'So ... so you know where they're living?'

M. Émile blinked his eyes affirmatively, and settled down to his meal, while M. Grandvalet continued staring at him, in the grip of a sudden, undefinable foreboding.

'Mustard, please!' shouted M. Émile to the waiter, and added in a lower voice: 'It's the best time, you know; we'll catch our love-birds in the nest! ... By the way, you were quite wrong about your daughter; she's not so simple as all that! Do you know what she did just now while we were in the street? Climbed out by a back window and walked across a roof.'

‘Do you mean she saw us?’

‘You’ve said it!’

A man at the next table, his curiosity roused by the scraps of conversation he overheard, was listening with all his ears. More ill at ease than ever, M. Grandvalet timidly suggested:

‘Suppose we leave it till tomorrow?’

‘And let ’em make a getaway? Not likely!’

Yet, after all, why not? What would be gained by breaking in on them?

‘Ask for the bill,’ said M. Émile, ‘and we’ll hop into a taxi.’

M. Grandvalet comforted himself with the thought that once they’d reached their destination he would put his foot down and insist on M. Émile’s going away.

*

‘What was the trouble with Van Lubbe?’ Juliette asked suddenly, as she helped herself to cheese.

Bachelin gazed at her sulkily.

‘Well, considering you were always asking me to break with him ...’ he began.

For a quarter of an hour neither had said a word. Juliette had laid the table, more for appearance’ sake than anything else – to make believe that nothing had changed in their life.

‘What did he say to you?’

He felt convinced that she was looking at his swollen nose, and a rush of anger came over him.

‘What did he say?’ he repeated, mimicking her tone. ‘All I can tell you is that, thanks to you and your high-and-mighty airs, we’re sunk.’

He knew this was untrue, unjust, but he had a desire to hurt her, though by so doing he hurt himself as well.

'And now,' he went on, 'I'll ask you to tell me just why that old hag didn't give the money.'

'There were policemen watching the house

He jumped up, ran to the window and gazed down into the dimly lighted street. No one was about

'Were you followed home?'

'No, I got out by the back, through the next house, and I took a taxi.'

Juliette had a queer sensation; everything she said, and Bachelin's words too, seemed to fall into a vacuum, evoking not the faintest echo in the minds of either. Almost she doubted if what they said had any meaning. And she gave no thought to the words that rose to her lips, mere sounds, conveying nothing.

'Sooner or later,' he grunted, 'they're bound to find us.'

Even her surroundings struck her as unreal, inane as a dream. Hitherto she had paid no great attention to the flat, and it came as a surprise to realize that it was utterly unlike any dwelling she had seen or heard of. Even the furniture had a bogus air, as makeshift as the brown-paper curtains; most of the things that go to make a home were lacking.

Suddenly Bachelin started striding up and down the room, gesticulating, muttering imprecations.

'Do keep calm!' she said in a low tone. 'Come and finish your supper.' Without being conscious of it, she had been going on with her meal.

He came to a halt in front of her and, controlling his voice, said:

'Tell me, Juliette. What would you do if I was arrested?'

The question found her unprepared. Never had she given a thought to that possibility.

'Own up to it,' he went on. 'You'd go straight back to your parents, wouldn't you?'

'I don't think so.'

'But you aren't sure. In other words, you'd do it. Of course you would – I know you!'

That was enough to set him off. A picture rose before him of the house in the Rue Creuse, its windows glowing in the night, and Juliette at the piano, with her father turning the pages of her music. He heard people saying in the days to come: 'She had a love-affair when she was quite a girl with a young scamp who's now in jail.' Quite likely she'd get married one fine day!

'You're hurting me, Jules.'

He had taken her head between his hands and slewed it round towards the light so as to watch her face. He could see nothing but an inhuman calmness.

'Of course you've never loved me,' he said bitterly. 'What a fool I've been!'

'Why do you say that?'

'Speak for yourself! Do you really feel you love me?'

'I ... I don't know.' She pulled herself together. 'I mean – why shouldn't I love you? You're terribly excitable, and cruel sometimes, but I'm sure you don't mean to be like that.'

'Oh, shut up!'

He walked abruptly to the window and pressed his face to it.

'What's wrong, dear?'

'What's wrong? You ask me that!'

Surely she had the sense to see that everything was wrong. Yes, everything! Couldn't she realize that he was cornered in this absurd little flat, like a rat in a trap; that he was at the end of his tether and there was no escape? Not only because of the police. Because of everything, because of her, Van Lubbe – and, above all, because he was bound to come to this. ...

For years he had been playing the ostrich, refusing to

face that inexorable fatality of which in his heart of hearts he had ever been aware. For years, since he was born, in fact, he had lived precariously, on the danger-line. That was the truth of it; he had made a bad start in life — in that hovel at Nevers, with a mother who a week after giving birth to him had resumed her occupation of selling newspapers in the street.

He had always been prone to sudden fits of rage; had always had a craving to wound himself by trying to wound others. And now there welled up from the depths of his being an immense disgust, an almost physical revulsion, that for the moment held his anger in suspense. Outwardly he seemed relatively calm when, slowly turning, he said to Juliette :

‘Please forgive me.’

‘For what?’

‘For nothing. No, for everything.’

‘What’s come over you?’ Your voice sounds quite different.’

He smiled, and the gentleness of his smile alarmed her.

‘What have you got in your mind?’

‘That you’d better do it.’

‘Do — what?’

‘What I said a moment ago. But now I’m not excited any longer. I mean what I say. You must go back home. Your father will forgive you.’

A mood of self-pitying emotion had come over him, and to make the most of it he went on speaking

‘After all, what have I really counted for in your life? What have we really meant to each other?’

‘Don’t ...’ she murmured, looking away from him.

‘No, let’s be frank — for once. Isn’t it a fact that we’ve never managed to be happy together, not for a single day? Oh, it wasn’t for want of trying. But

always something has cropped up. ... That's true, isn't it?'

She got up from her chair and began clearing the table.

'Hadn't we better make a move,' she said nervously, 'before ...'

'Juliette!'

She took a step towards him, the dirty glasses in her hand. With an unaccustomed gentleness he clasped her in his arms

'If only you knew how miserable I am! Tell me, Juliette; you love me, don't you – just a little?'

'You know I do.'

'No, I don't know it. And this evening I particularly want to know it, because ...'

'Because – what?'

'Oh, nothing.'

His voice was hoarse, his nose red, his eyes blurred with tears.

Juliette put back the plates and glasses in their usual places on the kitchen shelf, though all the time she knew that she would never use them again.

Both had a feeling of being at a loose end, as if a void had formed around them. Bachelin was idly fluttering the leaves of a calendar. When Juliette came back from the kitchen he noticed a slip of paper tucked into her blouse, and pointed :

'What's that?'

It was Van Lubbe's note. He read it without a word, tore it into small pieces and tossed them into the stove.

'Why didn't you give it to me?' There was a vicious edge to his voice.

'I was waiting till you'd calmed down a bit.'

'Or till he carried out his threat, eh?'

She was near the bed, and something prompted her to stretch herself on it.

'Well? Is that all you have to say?' He took a step towards the bed, furious at seeing her lying there with her face to the wall, and at his inability to guess what was in her mind.

'Juliette! Get up!'

She did not stir. She was weeping silently, almost tearlessly, though her face was twitching; she was too tired for tears.

'Didn't you hear what I said? I told you to get up.'

When she still made no movement he grabbed her arm, twisted it and pulled her towards him. She gazed at him with frightened eyes.

'You coward!'

His mind was in chaos. He was capable of anything at that moment; of beating her till she screamed for mercy, of going down on his knees to her, of hammering his head against the wall in a paroxysm of despair.

'So that's how you try to cheer me up, damn you!' His voice grew shrill 'You see how right I was just now. You're only waiting for the first chance to go back to your people.'

Abruptly his anger fell; sitting beside her on the bed, he muttered brokenly:

'Don't take any notice. You imagine how I feel. It's been coming on for weeks and months – and I've reached breaking-point. I used to think that once we were together all would come right. ...'

She would have liked to console him, but found no word to say, and she gazed at him with mingled curiosity and fear.

'It's as if I was under a curse. Everything I try to do goes wrong. Everything I touch is dirtied. ...'

Her eyes widened with dismay – the shock of an

appalling discovery. It was only an impression, yet there was no mistaking what she saw; at this moment Bachelin was play-acting – perhaps for her benefit, perhaps for his own as well. For she noticed that whenever he thought she wasn't looking at him his face changed, its expression grew more normal.

'But I shan't be here to trouble you much longer. Listen, Juliette. There's no point in our leaving tonight.' Conscious of her lucid gaze intent on him, he became self-conscious, played his part clumsily. 'I've got to ... to die; that's the best thing that can happen. Anyhow, it was bound to come to that sooner or later. So you ..'

'Don't say any more, please.'

What more, indeed, could he have said? What else could he do? In a way, she realized, play-acting or not, he was right; they were at the end of their tether. All they set their hand to seemed doomed to fail; every effort was quite futile.

He stood up again, in half a mind to smash some object in the room by way of a dramatic gesture. But he merely walked to the window, tore off the paper blind and looked into the street. A taxi was drawn up opposite the entrance and he eyed it suspiciously, listening to all the sounds in the building.

Juliette, too, had risen to her feet, her dress creased, her hair rumpled, and Bachelin gazed at her, puckering his brows. He was trying to thrust himself back into the mood of romantic exaltation that had possessed him a few minutes before.

Suddenly he took a quick step to the table and pulled out the drawer. It contained a packet of notepaper, a pen and ink.

The only sound was the scratching of the pen as he wrote. When he had done, he rose without a word and

went back to the window. The taxi was still in front and he pretended to be watching it, though actually he was observing Juliette's reflexion on the pane as she read what he had written.

'The time has come to make an end of it. I am of sane mind and the responsibility for my death lies with me alone'

He turned to see more clearly what effect this had had on Juliette. It was as if a conflict were in progress between them. But, taking no notice of him, Juliette was studying her face in the dressing-table mirror, gently rubbing with a finger a small pimple on her forehead, and settling her hair.

'I suppose you think I haven't the pluck?' he said in a low, sad tone

At last she turned towards him with a look of grave resignation, which seemed to tell him that such an idea had never crossed her mind. Then she too sat down at the table and, taking another sheet of paper, wrote in her tall, angular hand :

'I am tired of life, and I shall kill myself. Juliette Bachelin.'

Before putting down the pen she hesitated and added – not so much because she felt it as because it seemed the right thing to do – the words that she had added to a previous letter : *'Please forgive me, Papa.'*

She knew that Bachelin had understood, and it was she who went to fetch the revolver from the wardrobe drawer and placed it beside the letters.

From where he stood – the table was between them – he asked :

'Can you forgive me?'

‘For what . . ?’

He had a vague desire to work up another scene, to shed tears or break into reproaches; but it was impossible. Looking into himself he found nothing, only a bleak emptiness.

‘I swear I wanted to make you happy, Juliette.’ But his voice sounded hollow, unconvincing. ..

Had anyone come into the room at this moment, they would have probably have hidden the revolver and the letters, greeted the visitor with smiles, and proposed a cup of tea or coffee.

But no one came. They were left to their own resources, and both were equally at a loss

‘Juliette.’

‘Yes?’

‘Come and kiss me ’

Shutting his eyes, he tried to recapture the atmosphere of the little porch at Nevers in which they used to cling to each other, their wet lips pressed together in the darkness. It was Juliette who gently freed herself

He had an idea of walking back to the window, of making some last, forlorn attempt. But the thought passed at once, and he said gloomily .

‘I must have been born under an unlucky star.’

He saw her lips curl almost contemptuously; to her, evidently, such a remark seemed merely fatuous

She was growing impatient. Red cinders were tinkling down into the pan of the closed stove. The revolver made a dark patch on the white deal table, between the sheets of bluish notepaper.

‘Oh, do let’s get it over!’ she said with a sigh

Huddled in the back of a taxi speeding down almost empty streets, M. Grandvalet was gazing with unseeing eyes at the driver’s back, while M. Émile’s pipe sizzled beside him.

Bachelin picked up the revolver. His hand was trembling. With one finger he slipped back the safety-catch. He heard a voice at his side :

'Kill me first, please.'

They were standing shoulder to shoulder. Bachelin was shaking from head to foot. He heard himself say in a voice he hardly recognized as his :

'Do you love me?'

'Fire!'

'Do you love me?'

'I don't know. ... Fire!'

He opened his eyes wide and his jaw dropped, for he had pulled the trigger without realizing he had done so. Juliette was still standing, observing him with that searching gaze he knew so well; and now it seemed more penetrating than ever before, as if across the shadows closing in upon her she saw him in new perspective, comprehending all at last.

Smoke, powder-fumes, hung in the air. There came a sound of hurried footsteps in the flat above and Juliette swayed, staggered backwards to the bed and fell across it on her back, her eyes still wide open.

Waiting! Quite well he knew what she was waiting for. And her eyes were accusing him, again, of being a coward. There were footsteps on the stairs; his hand trembled still more violently as, clutching the revolver, he fumbled for the trigger.

He was cornered. The people from the flat above were at the door.

Juliette's eyes were still fixed on him, eyes perhaps already dead.

He felt his chest, ran his hand over his ribs trying to locate his heart. There was not a moment to lose. He could hear excited voices on the landing.

He brought the muzzle of the revolver to his chest,

and chose the place — so much to the left that almost certainly the bullet would glance off his ribs. As he pressed the trigger he shut his eyes.

A voice cried :

‘Open that door!’

A woman’s voice :

‘Break it in!’

He could hear every word in spite of the report echoing in his ears, in spite of his wound. For he knew he was wounded, there had been a sharp blow on his ribs. But in vain he waited to faint, to sink to the floor. He remained standing. He didn’t even feel pain.

More shouts outside the door. The thud of a shoulder crashing against it. A squeal of brakes in the street as a car stopped outside.

He could still see Juliette’s eyes. His heart was pounding wildly. He was desperately afraid. Three times he had shut his eyes, hoping that at last he would faint.

‘You know who I mean ... That young couple ...’ The concierge’s voice. ‘Haven’t you a master-key?’ someone asked.

It was unbearable. Something *must* be done. In a moment the door would open.

He took two soundless steps towards the bed. His eyes fell on his hand and he saw it red; blood was trickling from his wound.

And now at last he managed to faint, but in a queer way, without altogether losing consciousness. Thus he realized quite well that in falling he had brushed Juliette’s feet. And a moment later, across a medley of voices, he distinctly heard :

‘That’s her father, that old boy over there.’

Perhaps he might even have been able to open his eyes, and look at M. Grandvalet.

'Is she dead?' someone asked the doctor.

There was no answer, and a sudden silence fell on the room. Then skilful fingers probed Bachelin's wound, and he could not repress a grimace as a stab of pain shot through his chest. A woman's voice broke the silence :

'Look! *He's* alive, anyhow!'

THE END

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